

Bunyan's Life

Bunyan was born at Elstow in the year 1628 at the hand of poor and inconsiderable parents, but yet it pleased God to put it into the hearts of those parents to send their child to school, that he might learn to read and write. At nine years of age he thought much of his own guilt; and he says that in his boyhood he had but few equals for cursing, lying, swearing, and blaspheming the holy name of God. He likened himself to the worst sailor! He stood one day cursing and swearing beneath a neighbor's shop window, when the woman of the house declared that Bunyan's fury of cursing was horrendous. She told him that he was the ungodliest fellow that she'd ever seen in all her life, and that he was enough to destroy the whole youth of the town. This struck Bunyan with a sudden and irresistible conviction and shame. He was now nearly eighteen years old, and seemed hurrying as fast as he could go to destruction. But just at this time God began to draw him and the first step towards this reformation was his first marriage. "My mercy was," says Bunyan, "to light upon a wife whose father was counted godly." All she brought her husband were two books which her father had left her when he died, "The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven," and "The Practice of Piety." Sometimes Bunyan and his wife would sit down and read in the two volumes in company. They were very poor, but yet his marriage was the turning point in his history, and the means of breaking him away from sins that would have been his destruction.

But the first real conviction of sin, the first time he really felt what guilt was, happened on the hearing of a sermon on the sin of Sabbath-breaking. Under this sermon his conscience was aroused, and he went home with a great burden upon his spirit, believing that the preacher had made that sermon expressly for him. There he seemed to hear a voice crying into his soul, "Wilt thou leave thy sins, and go to heaven; or have thy sins, and go to hell?" He began to strive to keep all the Ten Commandments making that his way of getting to heaven. His neighbors were so awestruck with the change that they praised him for it, and because of that he grew very self-complacent, though all the while utterly ignorant of Jesus Christ and his own sinful nature. Yet he felt quite sure "that no man in England could please God better than he." It was his life that served as the best platform for the second most in print book in history.

When Bunyan was sixteen years old, his mother and sister died a month apart. His father

remarried a month later. Bunyan joined Cromwell's Army, where he continued his rebellious ways. Though it seems fighting in the Civil War sobered him considerably. On one occasion, his life was wonderfully spared. "When I was a soldier, I with others, was drawn out to go to such a place to besiege it. But when I was just ready to go, one of the company desired to go in my room; to which when I consented, he took my place, and coming to the siege, as he stood sentinel he was shot in the head with a musket bullet and died." Needless to say he left the army shortly thereafter.

One day, back home, he heard three or four poor women sitting and talking about the things of God and heaven. This conversation grew out of an experience of which Bunyan knew nothing; it was to him a new language, and he was confounded. He had deemed himself a religious man, though the idea of a new heart, or of there being any such thing necessary, had not entered into his head. He knew nothing of the conflict in the heart against sin, the power of the Holy Spirit, nor of redemption by the blood of Christ. But these were the subjects of this conversation, and by it he was much perplexed.

In 1651 he was introduced to Mr. Gifford by those women and was later led to repentance and faith. The year 1654 was a turning point for Bunyan. He moved to Bedford with his wife and four children under the age of six; his firstborn, Mary, was blind from birth. That same year, he became a member of Gifford's church, and was soon appointed deacon. His testimony became the talk of the town. Several people were led to conversion in response to it. By the end of the year, he had lost his pastor to death. In 1655, Bunyan began preaching to various congregations in Bedford. Hundreds came to hear him. He published his first book the following year with the goal to protect believers from being misled by Quaker and Ranter teachings about Christ's person and work. At length he determined to become identified with a body of professed Christians, who were treated with great scorn by other sects because they denied infant baptism, and he became engaged in the religious controversies which were fashionable in those days. His first encounter started with the Ranters, and soon came the Quakers.

Before the Society of Friends was formed, and their rules of discipline were published, many Ranters and others passed under the name of Quakers. Some of these denied that the Bible was the Word of God; and asserted that the death of Christ was not a full atonement for sin and that there is no future resurrection. The Quakers, who later united to form the Society of Friends, first denied all those errors. Their earliest apologist, Barclay says, "These are the doctrines of Christ,

held forth in precious declarations, spoken and written by the movings of God's Spirit.” Whoever it was that asserted the heresies Bunyan investigated them in the light of Divine truth. It was through this narrow search of the Scriptures that he was not only enlightened, but greatly confirmed and comforted in the truth.

Two years later, Bunyan published *A Few Sighs from Hell*, an exposition of Luke 16:19-31 about the rich man and Lazarus. This book attacks professional clergy and the wealthy who promote carnality. It was well received, and helped establish Bunyan as a reputable Puritan writer. About that same time, his wife passed away. In 1659, Bunyan published *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*, which shared his view of covenant theology, stressing the nature of the covenant of grace and the dichotomy between law and grace. This established him as a Calvinist, though it led to false charges of antinomianism by Richard Baxter. In 1660 he was arrested for preaching for which he remained in prison 12 years simply because he refused to stop preaching, though he lacked the license to do so. Prior to his arrest, Bunyan had remarried, this time to a godly young woman named Elizabeth. In 1688, Bunyan died suddenly from a fever that he caught while traveling in cold weather. He was buried in Bunhill Fields, close to Thomas Goodwin and John Owen.

He lived in times of extraordinary excitement. England was in a transition state. A long chain of events brought on a crisis which involved the kingdom in tribulation. It was the struggle between the unbridled despotism of Episcopacy, and the sturdy liberty of Puritanism.

Bunyan's Battle

John Bunyan became embroiled in a controversy with other Baptist ministers of his day over the role of baptism in determining fellowship. The majority view held only immersion of an adult believer could be considered baptism, and this act was required before granting membership or communion. While Bunyan agreed with that definition, he disagreed that this act was a *church membership* ordinance and argued for tolerance of differing views within a congregation. While other clergy also argued a similar position, his was unique because he was a Baptist minister. The irony of a Baptist minister not holding to Baptist truths is astounding. Though Bunyan failed

to influence the mainstream Baptist practice, indicated by the Baptist confessional documents of this time period, the controversy indicates that the budding Baptist movement contained differing streams of thought on this issue.

The act of baptism has been central to the Baptist identity since its blossoming development as a movement. Rejecting the paedobaptist position, Baptists have universally maintained that biblical baptism is an act conducted by an individual after conversion. Furthermore, Baptists have also enjoyed broad agreement in their view that such baptism is a prerequisite of entrance into local church fellowship and communion. Considering the various theological streams of the Baptist movement, particularly in the 17th century, this fidelity on the issue of baptism is amazing. In that period, one side of the theological spectrum was comprised of the General Baptists, who were strongly Arminian. On the opposite side were the Particular Baptists, who held firmly to Calvinism. Yet what was at stake for both these movements was the definition of what it means to be a “church”. For both groups, it was inconceivable that one could be a true church apart from practicing the Baptist view of baptism. As such, the act of baptism was viewed as an initiating ordinance - an ordinance required before one could be admitted into a true (or, in their view ‘Baptist’) church. Therefore, since Communion was considered to be an ordinance for the Church, only those baptized according to the Baptist definition could be admitted to the Lord’s Table.

When one considers the Baptist confessional documents produced in the 17th through 20th century, one immediately sees how this belief was codified and entrenched within the movement. The General Baptist stream contains strong exclusivist language. The Standard Confession of 1660, after affirming believer’s baptism by immersion, dictates the following: “And as for all such who preach not this Doctrine, but instead thereof, that Scripture less thing of Sprinkling of Infants (falsely called Baptism) whereby the pure word of God is made of no effect, and the New Testament-way of bringing in Members, into the Church by regeneration, cast out...[and further] all such we utterly deny, forasmuch as we are commanded to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather to reprove them ”. In the Orthodox Creed of 1678 (published in response to the Particular Baptist confession of 1677), while holding to the concept of believer’s baptism by immersion, states “And orderly none out to be admitted into the visible

church of Christ, without being first baptized” (Article XXVIII) and “no unbaptized, unbelieving, or open profane, or wicked heretical persons, out to be admitted to this ordinance [Communion] to profane it” (Article XXXIII).

In the Particular Baptist stream, the document now known as the First London Baptist Confession of Faith (1646) includes this statement in Article 39: “Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, given by Christ, to be dispensed upon persons professing faith, or that are made disciples; who upon profession of faith, ought to be Baptized, and after to partake of the Lord’s Supper.” Furthermore, the document specified the method of baptism in Article 40: “That the way and manner of dispensing this ordinance, is dipping or plunging the body under water”. The Second London Baptist Confession (1677/1689) is noticeably neutral in its language regarding the role of baptism in determining who should be admitted to Communion. However, in 1697 Baptist minister Benjamin Keach condensed the lengthy Second London Confession for the benefit of his congregation in Horsley-down. In this confession, Article 21 on Baptism affirms the Baptist concept of believer’s baptism by immersion, and ends with this interpolative statement: “Baptism being an initiating ordinance.” Over a century later, the framers of the New Hampshire Confession of Faith (1833) would draw on Keach’s confession and would codify this principle of separation in the clearest statement seen thus far. In Article 14, the confession states that baptism by immersion of the adult believer “is a prerequisite to the privileges of a Church relation; and to the Lord’s Supper”. Article 14 of the Baptist Bible Union Articles (1923) is identical in its language. When the original charter of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary was adopted in 1858 it contained the following statement on baptism (Article 15) in its confession of faith: “It is prerequisite to church fellowship and to participation in the Lord's Supper”. This confession later became the most influential confessional document within the Southern Baptist churches. The reworked Southern Baptist denomination documents of 1962 and 2000 (“The Baptist Faith and Message”) both contain identical statements (Article 9 and Article 7 respectively).

It’s because of all this that Bunyan allowed both Baptists and Padeobaptists membership into the Bedford church and participation in Communion. Both General and Particular Baptists publically challenged Bunyan’s position, and a pamphlet war was initiated. Particular Baptist clergymen in

London fiercely opposed Bunyan in writing, most notably William Kiffin, Henry Davers, and Thomas Paul. The General Baptist John Denne also wrote against his position.

While other churchmen of that era argued that one's position on baptism should not be a divisive issue regarding membership and communion, Bunyan is unique because he was one of the few Baptist ministers to do so. Few modern scholars have looked deeply into this aspect of Bunyan's life, which is what drew me. Henry Poe, writing in 1988 during the 300th anniversary of Bunyan's death, provides a helpful summary of this controversy for a general audience. Underwood's much-cited 1988 article looks at the broader issue of Bunyan as a controversialist. While offering valuable insight into this controversy, Underwood's aims are too broad for a useful analysis of this specific situation. Finally, Joseph Ban's 1984 article asked the provocative question, "Was John Bunyan a Baptist?" Here is where the rubber met the road. I, with my strong convictions and beliefs, had to rack my brain and heart for sometime before arriving at my conclusion. However, Ban's purpose was to determine if Bunyan could be considered a Baptist. This paper is written from the vantage point that Bunyan was indeed a Baptist, which is Ban's conclusion, and thus seeks to understand what impact this in-house controversy among 17th century Baptist clergymen had on the nascent Baptist movement. Specifically, this paper seeks to determine whether this mid-1600's controversy proves differing streams of orthodox Baptist thought and practice on this issue of Baptism and church fellowship.

Bunyan's Progress

Though hard to overlook and leave out, the Pilgrim's Progress is the sine qua non of Bunyan's works and sermons. However, The Pilgrim's Progress is indeed a progression from these works. It's been said that until this point, his allegories had been written as poems. Bunyan writes in prose possibly because he was not schooled in letters but in metalworking and wasn't trained to shape his words the way previous writers had. However, his writing still today proves to be unique and resourceful. In fact, Bunyan's style is very unique. While undertaking a similar task that John Milton faced, that is, to make the basis of the Bible more identifiable for the reader, Bunyan interlopes quotation from the Bible into his prose. It's as if Bunyan had written a research paper and the Bible was his data. Pilgrim's Progress is a book in which Bunyan

allegorizes his own religious experience as a guide for others. Bunyan's insights into mankind's desperate plight and God's redeeming grace make this a legendary classic. Regeneration, faith, repentance, justification, mortification, sanctification, and perseverance are poignantly painted for us in biblical, doctrinal, experiential, and practical detail. All of that is probably why controversy circles this book like a vulture would dead prey. Perhaps it's also reason enough why this particular book is the second most printed book behind the Bible.

Bunyan's Ministry

Bunyan's preaching ministry unfolded just as the Royal Restoration of 1660 rendered illegal all worship not conducted according to the forms of the Church of England. In no time Bunyan was arrested and sentenced. Prison conditions were unspeakable. However it was in prison that his preaching and counseling brought salvation and comfort to multitudes of men whose futures were bleak. Rightly distinguishing between the core of the gospel and church practices, Bunyan refused to take sides in the denominational wrangle over believers' versus infant baptism. He insisted that faith *alone (sola fide)* rendered one a Christian, and faith was sufficient to endear Christians to each other and make them welcome at each other's communion table. He wrote many sermons on single passages taking after the true Puritan formula.

Bunyan's Stand

The last work that he wrote in prison was the confession of his faith and reason of his practice as to mixed communion, not with the world, but with saints of other denominations. This plunged him into controversy with his Dissenting brethren (Baptists, Independents, and Presbyterians). He had been incarcerated nearly twelve years, and had determined to suffer to the end. And this was no exception. He found time to weigh the grounds and foundations of those principles for which he suffered, and he was a Nonconformist still. "I cannot, I dare not now revolt or deny my principles, on pain of eternal damnation" are his impressive words. "Faith and holiness are my professed principles, with an endeavor to be at peace with all men. Let they themselves be judges, if aught they find in my writing or preaching doth render me worthy of almost twelve years' imprisonment, or one that deserveth to be hanged or banished for ever, according to their tremendous sentence. If nothing will do unless I make of my conscience a continual butchery and

slaughter-shop, unless putting out my own eyes, I commit me to the blind to lead me, I have determined, the Almighty God being my help and shield, yet to suffer, if frail life might continue so long, even until the moss shall grow over mine eye-brows, rather than to violate my faith and principles.”

He formed branch churches at Gamlingay, Hawnes, Cotton-end, and Kempston, in connection with that at Bedford. When he opened the new meeting place, many were constrained to stay without, though it was very spacious, as they were striving to partake of his instructions. There he lived keeping himself from all secular employments to follow that of his call to the ministry. His peace was interrupted by a severe controversy with the Christian world over communion at the Lord's Table, which had commenced while he was in prison. He would admit none but those who, by a godly conversation, brought forth fruits for repentance. Nor dared he refuse any who were admitted to spiritual communion with the Redeemer. Every sect that celebrated the Lord's Supper, fenced the table round with ritual observances, except the Baptist church at Bedford, which stood mightily for non-sectarianism. A singular proof of this is the catechism called *Instruction of the Ignorant* written by Bunyan. It was adapted for the use, not only of his church, but of Christians of all denominations.

Bunyan was by no means a latitudinarian. No one felt greater decision than he did for the truths of our holy faith. When his Lord's design in Christianity was, as he thought, perverted by a beneficed clergyman, then he sent forth from prison an answer risking his life. His love for the pure doctrines of the gospel was as decided as his aversion to sectarian titles. “As for those factious titles of Anabaptists, Independents, Presbyterians, or the like, I conclude that they came neither from Jerusalem, nor from Antioch, but rather from hell and Babylon, for they naturally tend to divisions.” The only title that he loved was that of Christian. “It is strange to see how men are wedded to their own opinions, beyond what the law of grace and love will admit. Here is a Presbyter-here an Independent and a Baptist, so joined each man to his own opinions, that they cannot have that communion one with another as by the testament of the Lord Jesus they are commanded and enjoined.” The meaning which he attached to the word 'sectarian' resembled that of the Pharisees - they who in Divine worship turn aside from the rule of the written Word, and in their manner do it to be seen of men. Bunyan was most decided as to the importance of

baptism and the Lord's Supper. Surely he would've loved our time discussing the marks of the church.

Not only had Bunyan clearly defined his views of the ordinances of the gospel, but he did also of all its doctrines. His knowledge upon those solemn subjects were drawn exclusively from the sacred pages. He belonged to no sect, but that of Christian which had guided him in forming his principles, he cheerfully allowed to others. Nonetheless, water baptism had been considered a pre-requisite to the Lord's Supper by all parties. The Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Independents, had denounced the Baptists as guilty of a most serious heresy, or blasphemy, in denying the right of infants to baptism. Not only did they exclude the Baptists from communion with their churches, but they persecuted them with extreme rigor. When the Independents made laws for the government of their colony in America, in 1644, one of the enactments was, "That if any person shall either openly condemn, or oppose the baptizing of infants, or seduce others, or leave the congregation during the administration of the rite, they shall be sentenced to banishment." The same year a poor man was tied up and whipped, for refusing to have his child baptized. The Rev. J. Clarke, and Mr. O. Holmes, of Rhode Island, for visiting a sick Baptist brother in Massachusetts, instead of being admitted to the Lord's table, they were arrested, fined, imprisoned, and whipped. The Baptists considered that immersion in water was the marriage rite between the believer and Savior; that to sit at the Lord's table without it was spiritual adultery and therefore refused to admit any person to the Lord's table who had not been baptized in water upon a personal profession of faith in the Savior. This was the state of parties when Bunyan, at the commencement of his pastorate, entered into the controversy. Bunyan denied that water could form a wedding garment, or that water baptism was a prerequisite for the Lord's table, or that being immersed in water was putting on our Lord's dress by which disciples may be known. Rather he stressed John 13:35. Ample attempts were made to embroil Bunyan in a public disputation in London upon this subject, which he very wisely avoided.

After a lapse of nearly two centuries, Bunyan's peaceable principles have greatly prevailed and now few churches refuse communion on account of the mode, in which water baptism has been administered. The Baptists are no longer deemed heretics as they formerly were. Robert Robinson praises Bunyan's work, and advocates his sentiments upon the most liberal principles. One of his remarks is very striking - "Happy community! that can produce a dispute of one

hundred and fifty years unstained with the blood, and unsullied with the fines, the imprisonments, and the civil inconveniences of the disputants. As to a few coarse names, rough compliments, foreign suppositions, and acrimonious exclamations, they are only the harmless squeaking of men in a passion, caught and pinched in a sort of logical trap.” To this time, Bunyan was only known as an extraordinarily talented and eloquent man whose memory was overflowing with the sacred Scriptures. All his sermons and writings were drawn from his own mental resources, aided, while in prison, only by the Bible, a concordance, and Fox's *Book of Martyrs*. It must not be understood that he read no other works but his Bible and *Book of Martyrs*, but that he only used those in composing his various treatises while in confinement. He certainly had and read The Plain Man's Pathway, Practice of Piety, Luther on the Galatians, Clarke's Looking-glass for Saints and Sinners, Dodd on the Commandments, Andrews' Sermons, Fowler's Design of Christianity, D'Anvers and Paul on Baptism, and doubtless all the books which were within his reach, calculated to increase his store of knowledge.

About this time he published a small quarto tract, in which he scripturally treats the doctrine of eternal election and reprobation. This rare book was written to guard his friends from deception; for he had become so popular an author that several forgeries had been published under his initials. These few pages on election contain a scriptural treatise upon a very solemn subject, written by one whose mind was so consumed by the fear of God. Its value is priceless to believers, especially by those who cannot see the difference between God's foreknowledge and his foreordination.

Bibliography

Bunyan, John. Grace Abounding. New Kensington: Whitaker House, 1993.

Davies, Michael. Graceful Reading: Theology and Narrative in the Works of John Bunyan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Kaufmann, U. Milo. The Pilgrim's Progress and Traditions in Puritan Meditation. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966.

John Bunyan: Author and Preacher. Online.

<http://www.wholesomewords.org/biography/bbunyan.html>