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William Wheeler's Last Legacy

AMONG the books in the Baptist Union Library, is a small leather-bound volume, measuring $6\frac{3}{8}$ in. \times $4\frac{1}{4}$ in., and containing 72 numbered pages, and several blank pages, some of which have been written on. This book, printed in London in 1670, is entitled *A Spiritual Portion of Heavenly Treasure, Bequeathed by Mr. William Wheeler, late Minister of the Gospel, and Pastor of a Church of Christ at Cranfield in Bedfordshire; as his Last Legacy to his Wife and Children*. It is the property of the Cranfield church and, together with other Cranfield records, is at present in the care of the Baptist Historical Society. A handwritten note indicates that it was left in the Cranfield Meeting House, together with a copy of Calvin's *Institutes*, "when Mr. Wakefield enter'd the said house". William Wakefield, pastor of the East End church from 1792 till 1824, was prominent in the moves to establish the Bedfordshire Union of Christians in 1797. During his ministry, the chapel was enlarged. Unfortunately, the *Institutes* "were destroyed in 1870, by a good man who did not know their worth". The *Spiritual Portion* is extremely rare, and is not mentioned by Whitley in his *Bibliography*.¹ Wing's *Short Title Catalogue* lists only one copy, which is in a private collection. There is a copy (with pages 71-2 missing) in the Museum Library of the Bunyan Meeting, Bedford.

A note written in the cover of the Cranfield copy by Dr. John Brown, who was pastor of the Bunyan Meeting from 1864 till 1903, describes Wheeler as the first pastor of the East End church. A commonly accepted tradition is that the church was founded by Wheeler, who was rector of Cranfield, on his ejection at the time of the Stuart Restoration.² The picture, however, is not quite so simple. The early history of the church is, in fact, somewhat obscure, and Wheeler's part in it is not so clear as we could wish. Such evidence as is available is set out in H. G. Tibbutt's *Cranfield Baptist Church 1660-1960* (published 1961). It would certainly seem unlikely that Wheeler was ever rector of Cranfield, though it is possible that he was curate there. In 1660, the Bedford church wanted him as its pastor, but owing to the reluctance of the church where he was a member, to release him, the matter was dropped.³ When he became "pastor" at Cranfield, is not known,⁴ nor is his exact status in the church known, since John Gibbs, of Newport Pagnell appears to have exercised general oversight of the Cranfield congregation at this time. Late in 1664, or early in 1665, he was committed to the county gaol in Bedford, where Bunyan was already a prisoner. He died in March, 1667-8.⁵

The *Spiritual Portion*, written in rhyme, is in two parts, the first of which is really addressed to his wife, though the title page,

doubtless doing service for both parts, has "wife and children".⁶ It is fourteen pages in length, and is introduced by a two-page "epistle" to his wife, in prose. The second part, Wheeler's "last legacy to his children", is considerably longer, the "epistle" occupying some eight pages,⁷ and the "legacy" itself, forty-four. The margin of each page is filled with Scripture references.

This little work is of interest, not so much for the quality of its poetry (which could perhaps more accurately be described as verse), as for the quality of its piety. It is a compendium of gospel truth, setting out the faith which meant everything to him, and the implications of that faith for everyday life. Such was William Wheeler's legacy to his loved ones. It was intended as a kind of *vade mecum* for those whom he could no longer guide on their journey through life. There is nothing in it to suggest that Wheeler ever expected it to be read by anyone other than his wife and children. The first part especially is deeply affectionate and personal in tone. Indeed, the entire work is marked by a tender and affectionate concern for the eternal welfare of his family. His understanding of Christianity was essentially evangelical, with a strong emphasis on personal salvation. At the same time, he had a good deal to say about the implications of the gospel for everyday living. Perhaps the most striking feature of the book, however, is its spirit of moderation and tolerance. This is to be seen especially in the introductory "epistle" to the second part.

This "Paper-Present" to his family, as he called the *Spiritual Portion*, had its origin in a presentiment of death, which he took to be a divine warning.

"Whilst I did live in perfect health,
A sense of death, I know not how
Did on me seiz, as 'twere by stealth,
Which made my stubborn heart soon bow."

It was an experience which made him "fearful and yet glad", fearful because of an overwhelming sense of his spiritual deadness and barrenness, and glad because he felt God was giving him an opportunity "more like a saint to live". He thereupon resolved :

"My house in order first to set
And all things leave in such a frame
That nothing might disturb or let
Me at my parting, to my blame."

In the second place, he determined "some good Instructions to leave" for his wife and children, and, grieved at the time he had already wasted,

"Thirdly, upon my heart imprest
A strong desire there was, that I
Might spend my little time to th' best,
Before I in the Grave should lie."

The part addressed to his wife was intended to bring her consolation and strength in her bereavement, and at the same time to encourage her in the Christian life. The hope which he expressed was that, on hearing her dead husband speak to her as it were out of his grave, she might find "no little comfort and refreshing", especially, as he told her, at a time "when thou never expectest to hear anything more of thy Husband in this World; that then he should as it were come again to thee, and afford thee one half hour's discourse for thy comfort in this little book". His words reveal a true grasp of the Christian understanding of death, and a strong faith in God's loving purpose for his children, as the following extracts show :

"Dear Heart ! It wounds me most of all,
That thou shouldst grieve thy tender heart
And drink down Wormwood mixt with Gall,
And put thyself to needless smart.
Don't so, my Love ; there is no cause ;
'Tis want of faith in them that do :
I am deliver'd from the Jaws
Of Death, and gone to Heav'n too.

* * *

"Don't grieve, my Love ; the time is short,
Till we again in Bliss shall meet.

* * *

"Dear Heart ! for us it is a shame,
That Christians do profess to be
And lively hope have through his Name,
Of life and Immortality ;
To look on Death as such a thing
As others do, that faith have not :
Since Christ hath taken out the Sting,
And the Hand-writing out did blot.
Dear Love ! Give ear to what I say ;
We do not die as other men ;
An Earthly House we down do lay,
To take an Heav'nly up again."

To sorrow as others do, would be to question both the reality of Christ's victory over death, and his love :

"Methinks it doth disgrace the Blood
That for us our sweet Jesus shed,
As if his death had done no good,
Nor broke the deadly Serpent's Head.

* * *

"What fools are they that have a thought
That God, who made the Eye and Ear,
And both by wisdom rarely wrought,

That he should neither see nor hear ?
 Just so (my Dear) like Fools do we
 Imagine in our carnal minds,
 That God in us Affections free
 Doth plant, to do what duty binds ;
 And yet himself such love doth want,
 And care, that suits a Fathers mind ;
 And that his Bowels are more scant
 Than all the Creatures in their kind."

Since God "with love is full to th' brim", Wheeler could assure his wife,

"O He's (my Dear) thy All in All,
 And in his hands thy Husband still
 He hath, and back he would him send
 To thee, thy heart with joy to fill,
 If it unto thy good might tend.

* * *

"Why then should we be sad or fear,
 Since he for his doth take such care?"

The Christian, in fact, should "rejoyce and joy again", and evermore rejoyce, whate'er befalls". At the same time,

"There is a mourning that's in date
 With Saints, that Nature doth require ;
 But that is mild and moderate,
 And sweetly mixt with Joy intire :
 Which though it melts the tender heart
 Of gracious Souls, yet is it free
 From that heart-killing deadly smart
 That in poor Worldlings we do see.
 And this same Grief doth make the mind
 More gracious, humble, sober, wise,
 More just, good, faithful, tender, kind ;
 And in this Baca, Springs do rise."

The rest of the first part is concerned with counsel for daily living. He urges his wife "to work while it is day . . . until the Bridegroom comes in sight", being at all times careful to watch and pray, relying on Christ's strength,

"Lest the old Serpent should thee catch,
 Thou know'st the World's a ticklish place,
 As full of snares as it can hold ;
 And we are weak without his Grace,
 And like to Eve, are too too bold.

* * *

"Our Lusts within like Tinder be,
 And his Temptations like a Spark ;

Nor sooner touch, but take do we ;
 And if he shoots, he hits the Mark.

* * *

“ And whilst (my Love) this course we take,
 We are within our Castle-wall ;
 That though he make our hearts to ake,
 He cann't prevail to make us fall.”

To neglect prayer, resting secure in our own strength, however, would be to court disaster, and “ if the Tempter us surprize, we must come home by weeping-cross ”. This does not mean that Wheeler advocated an altogether other-worldly kind of spirituality.

“ Again (my Love) whilst thou liv'st here,
 Be alwayes carefull to do good ;
 Relieve the poor, their Hearts up cheer,
 As Christ hath thine, even by his Blood.”

Her carriage to all, rich and poor, high and low, young and old, bond and free, wise and simple, friend and foe, should be friendly, and humble.

“ An humble carriage is the best,
 And that which God and man doth please ;
 And all men it offendeth least,
 And wrath and anger doth appease.”

Above all, he urged her “. . . In God alone delight thy self, make him thy All ”, at the same time seeking to bring her children up in the nurture of the Lord, that they might come to fear and love God in their youth, “ that golden day.”

“ And one thing more I shall commend
 Unto thy trust and tender care ;
 My Children (Love) whom God did lend
 As blessings from his mercy rare,

* * *

“ O pray (Dear Heart) and often pray
 Unto thy God, as I have done,
 That they may all his Voice obey,
 And in his Ways, their Race may run.”

The second part commences with a description of man's plight apart from Christ. Wheeler did not hesitate to remind his children (“ my Babes ”, he called them) that they were dead in sin and “ of the Serpents Race ”, “ And none but Christ your souls can save ”. Godly parents are “ a mercy great ”, yet even their endeavours are in vain, unless their children are converted.

“ O nothing but that Change alone,
 That all things new within doth make,
 And you and Christ unites in one,
 Can save you from th'infernal Lake.”

Yet this "change" cannot take place "if his great Voice don't call", the inference to be drawn from this doctrine being that we should always be ready in case he should call.

"There is a time (my Children dear)
 When you the Means of Grace attend,
 That Christ (this Wisdom)* will come near,
 And to your hearts his Spirit send.
 And that shall rap, and bounce and knock,
 At Conscience-Door ; and shall awake
 The sleepy Soul, now like a Block,
 And make poor guilty Conscience quake.
 This is your time ; O fear not now
 To open wide to him the Door ;
 For he your stubborn hearts will bow,
 And will convince you more and more.
 And make you know your selves and sin,
 And Death & Wrath, the Curse & Hell."

The natural inclination of the guilty conscience is like "that naked man, whom in the garden God did call", to be afraid and seek to hide rather than open one's heart to Christ. While it is true, however, that at his coming, he makes us aware of our lost condition, his ultimate purpose is to save.

"He'll shew you how he's satisfied
 By Christ's sweet death, for all your sin,
 As much as if your selves had dy'd
 Upon the Cross, the Crown to win.
 He'll make you see that 'tis all one,
 That Christ his Law did once fulfil,
 As if that you the same had done,
 And perfectly had wrought his will.
 And what your Christ for sinners wrought,
 He fully will impute to you."

How is true Gospel preaching to be distinguished from that which is "Chaff" and "meer Riff-Raff"?

"That preaching of the Word, say I,
 In which a gracious Spirit runs ;
 Therein the means of Grace doth lie ;
 Such Preachers are Anointed Ones.
 Such as do preach what they do know,
 And testify what they have seen ;
 These to poor souls much good will do,
 Their word is like a Sword that's keen."

*Proverbs 1. 22-3.

Such preachers are contrasted with the "carnal" preachers who "feed themselves and starve the Flock", are "blind" as any owl", and "may preach till Doomsday come, and scarcely save one simple soul". These run, though are not sent.

'Tis true, some Truths these men dispense,
And do the same in words declare ;
But not i' th' Spirit's evidence.

* * *

"And hence they want that Majesty,
That melting and convincing pow'r
That doth in all true Preaching lie,
To shake the heart, that Rocky Tow'r.
They speak not by that living Voice
That makes the Dead to hear and live ;
Christ's sheep to hear them can't rejoyce ;
Strange sounds to them their Voice doth give."

Nevertheless Wheeler made it clear that

"My scope is not you to deter
From hearing any godly man ;
Dissenter though, or Presbyter,
That faithfully doth what he can :
And hath Gods holy Spirit, to
Assist in what he undertakes.

* * *

"I do not like that Spirit in some,
That none but their own Tribe will hear,
Though ne'er so gracious, and come home
Unto good hearts, and them up chear.

* * *

"Again, neither dare I deny
But God to us the Word may bless,
Whoever it be held forth by ;
Though 'tis but seldom I confess.

* * *

"Yet at these men, I cannot wink,
Because they Lanthorns dark have been,
To lead poor simple Souls to Hell ;
They under them the Light han't seen,
But all their Life in darkness dwell.

* * *

"I know in this old Ministrie
Which long time hath amongst us bin,
That here and there some good men be ;
But truly they are very thin,

And for these men, I love them well ;
 Though for their way, I judge them out ;
 And though in Gifts some do excell,
 Yet in their way, God will them rout.
 I don't deny such good men are
 The Ministers of Christ the Lord ;
 Them such their very Gifts declare,
 When they do pray, or preach his Word.
 But truly this, I must them tell,
 That in this point they are far wide ;
 For in their Fold the Goats do dwell,
 And they profess to be their Guide.

* * *

“ These men, though good, yet still they stand
 Upon the wrong side of that Cloud,
 Which is to lead God's Own by th' hand,
 From Egypt's Land and Pharaoh proud.”

Next follows a catalogue of what Wheeler described as “ whole-
 som means of grace ”—Bible reading, meditation, prayer, discourse
 with “ saints ” (i.e. fellow-believers) and communion with God,
 listening to the faithful preaching of God's Word, and going to
 “ good Christian Meetings ”. The note of urgency is constantly
 sounded—“ Now rise at Midnight him to praise ”, “ Don't neglect
 the precious hour ”.

“ 'Tis but a day that work you can ;
 There is a night that soon will come :
 Besides, this day's but like a span ;
 Work hard before night drives you home.

* * *

“ Now take all opportunities
 That God doth put into your hand,
 All good to do that in you lies,
 And evil likewise to withstand.
 Now let your conversation be
 Such as his Gospel may become ;
 Now walk like Saints, that all may see
 That you this world count not your home.”

Such a life, however, is only possible where conversion has taken
 place. Only he who “ from faith that works by love ” strives to
 obey the divine commands will have the power from on high, “ on
 earth with joy to run (his) Race ”.

“ If Cart before the Horse we set,
 Tho' Haight, Gee, Whoe, Hut, Ha, we cry ;
 Yet something always still doth let,
 And unremov'd the load will lie.”

The author-father acknowledged that his lines had been penned with tears and prayers for the conversion of his children, and urged whichever of them embraced Christ first, to seek the salvation of the others. Then comes a warning of the dangers of trusting one's own strength which is "but a Lye", and one's own wisdom, which is "a blind Guide", as "our Rabbies wise and sage", and the "blind Priests of these our days" have done, to their own confusion. The kind of friendship and fellowship that a Christian has is important. Mere professors should be avoided at all costs, so too should "Notionists", who are all head and no heart, and those who are concerned only about "meer Formes and Outsidess". This is not to deny altogether the value of outward forms.

" But that which I against do drive,
Is, when men with the pow'r of grace,
The outside part of Worship strive,
To set at least, in equal place."

There is certainly no place in the Christian life for disputes about "forms and words", or "needless questions", or what "onely doth to by-things tend". On the other hand, spiritually profitable converse with those whose hearts are divinely "match'd, pair'd and suited to your own", is to be encouraged.

" Christ in this talk with you will meet,
Warming your hearts making them glow,
That you from their communion sweet
Refresh'd and chear'd away shall go."

It is interesting to notice Wheeler's attitude to a Christian's daily work. Slothfulness is a great evil. To "seek some honest calling", therefore, "doth suit with God's command". This will not only enable a man to provide for his family and help the poor, but will ensure that his heart is "dis-engaged", so that he can give himself to prayer, praise and Christian fellowship without "that base distracting care". He must, however, always be on his guard against covetousness, that

". . . base cursed bitter Root
Which poysons all where it doth live
And where it can but set the foot",

and which brings in its train, all kinds of sins, temptations, griefs and vexations, gnawing daily at conscience, and devouring all grace and good in the soul. Indeed it is the hardest thing,

" The hand closely at work to be
On earth, and yet the heart on wing
Heav'n-ward, and from the Earth set free."

The man who can maintain such a balance,
 "He's more the Master of his Art,
 Than all in Oxford—streets that go."

Wheeler expected diligence in business to be rewarded by prosperity. Where this blessing was lacking, the cause should be sought earnestly with prayer. Perhaps some "cursed Achan" is the hindrance, or maybe, God is trying

"How you'll submit unto his hand,
 And be content in poverty,
 As well as in a flowing land",

or, possibly, in his wisdom he

"Knows how his mercies you'd abuse
 And Blessings Curses soon would be
 When them you know not how to use.
 And then, because he loves you dear,
 And knows that this condition's best
 For your immortal Souls welfare
 In this estate he'd have you rest."

In this case, God will "make up abundantly your outward wants with inward Grace". Even Christ and his apostles were poor, and

"This Lot was lin'd them out by God
 As their sweet earthly heritage."

Such in outline is William Wheeler's counsel to his children. The work ends with this charming benediction :

"And now the Blessing of that GOD
 That once within the Bush did dwell,
 And which on Joseph's Head abode,
 Make you in Blessings to excell."

Several additional comments are called for. In the first place, the care with which this particular copy of the book has been looked after deserves mention. For nearly 300 years this little volume has been lovingly handled by members of the Cranfield church in the knowledge that something of value has been entrusted to them. If only all our churches had cared similarly for the historical treasures in their possession !

Secondly, the significance of the *Spiritual Portion* itself must be recognised. The modern reader may feel that its thought is quaint and its verse mediocre. Its importance for us, however, lies in the fact that it provides a glimpse of a man who played a leading part in the early years of a little Christian congregation in Bedfordshire, but about whom little is otherwise known. Moreover, it reveals a side of him which would not be likely to find a place in official records. It would be interesting to have an account of his pastoral labours. What we know of him as a husband and a father, however, leads us to believe that he was no less diligent in seeking the spiritual welfare of those in his care.

Noteworthy, in the third place, is the tolerant attitude already referred to. The *Spiritual Portion* was written at a time of special difficulty for Dissenters. Indeed Wheeler himself knew what it was to be imprisoned for his religious convictions. He had a firm grasp of evangelical principles, and did not hesitate to warn his children of the dangers of the "old Ministrie". Even so, what he said was singularly free from bitterness and narrow-mindedness, and modern Baptists and Congregationalists would do well to take note of what he wrote nearly 300 years ago.

NOTES

¹ This is presumably because Wheeler was not a Baptist, nor at this stage, was the church. Even so, writings of this sort provide important background material for Baptist History.

² A. G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised*, 1934 (pp. 522-3) accepts the tradition that Wheeler was rector of Cranfield, and implies that he was ejected between August and October, 1661. A number of statements about Wheeler in *Calamy Revised* are corrected by H. G. Tibbutt, *op. cit.*

³ On 25th July, 1660, when it was clear that Burton was too ill to continue as pastor, the Bedford church agreed to consult Donne, Wheeler and Gibbs. Burton died in August, and in October, the church again agreed to consult them. A meeting between representatives of the church and the three neighbouring pastors was in fact arranged for 8th November. In the meanwhile, "a considerable company of the brethren" in the church felt drawn to Wheeler, who promised to consider the matter, to "seek the Lord", and consult the congregation of which he was a member. Accordingly, a letter was sent to Gibbs, as the "teacher" of the congregation. The first indication that the matter was not being pursued is to be found in an entry in the church book recording the meeting early in December, 1663, at which Samuel Fenne and John Whiteman were chosen as pastors and elders.

⁴ An entry in the Bedford church book dated 30th September, 1658, refers to "the congregations walking with Mr. Donne, Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Gibbs".

⁵ H. G. Tibbutt, *op. cit.*, mentions a William Wheeler of Lincoln College, Oxford, who graduated B.A. in July, 1639, and M.A. in May, 1642. It would be interesting to know whether this was the William Wheeler of Cranfield. There was certainly at least one other person of this name contemporary with him. The British Museum possesses two short tracts by William Wheeler, a civil engineer. One 12 pp. octavo (published in 1644 or soon after) tells of his gruelling experiences in Holland, 1638-1643; the other (1651), 8 pp. octavo, lists his professional abilities. It is likely that the William Wheeler whose name is included among the signatories to the letter dated 13th May, 1653, addressed to Cromwell and the Council of the Army, nominating two persons to represent Bedfordshire in the so-called Little Parliament, is the author of the *Spiritual Portion*. E. B. Underhill includes the letter in his *Confessions of Faith and other Public Documents illustrative of the Baptist Churches of England in the 17th Century* (1854).

⁶ At the time of his imprisonment, he and his wife had nine small children.

⁷ This will be printed in full in a forthcoming issue of the *Quarterly*.