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WAS JOHN BUNYAN A BAPTIST?

A CASE-STUDY IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Was the author of *Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Holy War* a Baptist? Macaulay considered these two works to be the finest allegories ever written. Whether the creator was a Baptist or a Congregationalist does not appear to be a question of great importance. At best, it would seem to be a scholar's diversion. Yet, this apparently simple question tests the historian's scientific tool kit. More importantly, it provides valuable insights into seventeenth century Separatist theology and ecclesiology.

John Bunyan, 1628-1688, is generally considered, especially in English-speaking North America, to have been a Baptist preacher. The majority of literary critics, both here and in the United Kingdom, also consider Bunyan to have been a Baptist. Inasmuch as such critics deal primarily with Bunyan's creative products, they depend upon historians to provide the basic biography of the author. British writers, both Baptist and Congregational, claim Bunyan as one of their own.¹ To add to the confusion, some Baptist writers have refused to acknowledge Bunyan as a Baptist pastor or Bedford as a Baptist congregation. While the basic fact appears easy enough to establish, finding supportive evidence and proof turn out to be more difficult.

The research on this question has involved examining what original sources were available in the libraries of Oxford, including the Bodleian, Mansfield College and the Angus Collection at Regent's Park College. I regret that time allowed only a cursory examination of the vast riches of the British Museum in London and the libraries in Bedford, England. This essay traces the development of the biographies of Bunyan from the earliest to the recent period. Lack of biographies is not the problem. Within a decade of his death, an anonymous writer prepared a 'Life and Actions of Mr John Bunyan from his cradle to his Grave'. Published in 1698, this was prefixed to the spurious third part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In 1700 a different version appeared, the anonymous author claiming to have been a friend of Bunyan's. The factual material for these early biographies came from Bunyan's own *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, which, while rich in spiritual insights and psychological disclosures, is scanty in terms of precise, personal details. Autobiographical writings are limited to *Grace Abounding* and a personal account of his imprisonment not published until 1765, seventy-seven years after his death. Thus the historian has no word from Bunyan on personal matters. For example, what was the name of his first wife? We do know that she brought two books to their household and their titles, namely *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* and *The Practice of Piety*.² Nor does Bunyan provide adequate information about the names or number of his children.

Another biography appeared in 1787, purportedly by a 'friend of the gospel'. The nineteenth century brought biographies of Bunyan by Joseph Ivimey (1825), Robert Southey (1830), Robert Philip (1839), G. E. Sargent (1848), Macaulay (1853), George Offor (1862), James Copner (1874), J. A. Froude (1880), and Edmund Venables (1888). John Brown's *John Bunyan: His Life, Times and Work* (1885) by its excellence in research of original records quickly established itself as the standard biography. Important studies in the twentieth century include W. Hale White (1905), C. H. Firth (1911), R. H. Coats (1927), G. O. Griffith (1927), G. B. Harrison (1928), not to be confused with Frank Mott Harrison who, that same year, revised John Brown's biography of 1885. More recent and authoritative biographies include Henri A. Talon (1951), Roger Sharrock (1954) and Richard Greaves (1969). This does not exhaust the list, as a glimpse at the catalogue in the Bunyan Meeting Library will disclose.

Apparently no biographer had questioned Bunyan as being a Baptist until the appearance of John Brown's work in 1885. Brown's biography, revised by Harrison, remains the definitive study to the present day. Brown was pastor of Bunyan Meeting in Bedford for forty years, from 1864 to 1903. Brown found parish records that appeared to indicate that two of John Bunyan's children had been christened after the date when Bunyan had joined the Bedford congregation. If Brown's surmise were proven accurate, serious doubt would be cast upon Bunyan's status as an anti-paedobaptist.

Within the year, Brown's question brought a published response from across the Atlantic. Thomas Armitage, in his *A History of the Baptists*, published in New York in 1886, devoted sixty-five pages to a detailed refutation of Brown's conclusions regarding Bunyan's religious connections. The controversy continued in the pages of the religious press. *The Freeman: Organ of the Baptist Denomination* on 3rd August 1888 carried a chapter from a book newly published by a British Baptist attacking Brown's argument. Brown, in turn, launched his attack upon Armitage in the pages of *The British Weekly* for 18th January 1889. A reply to Brown's article from a Nottingham correspondent appeared on 8th February 1889, echoing Armitage's arguments in substance. Contradicting Brown, Armitage concluded that the christened child was the offspring of John Bunyan, Jr. This conclusion fits with a hearth tax record also uncovered by Brown. Armitage and others insist that what we do know about the author, the senior Bunyan, would indicate that just two years out of prison, with his personal financial affairs in a shamble, the elder Bunyan was in no position to pay such a tax. The tax-payer and property-owner was John Junior who conveyed the property to a granddaughter, Hannah, the apparent last survivor of the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*.³ W. T. Whitley reviewed the evidence and summarized the affair in this way: 'Legal demonstration there is none. The moral probability is extremely high that the man whose child was christened in

1672 was not the Elder of the Gathered Church, but the son John Bunyan junior'."

John Brown, a Congregationalist of the nineteenth century, assumed that his newly uncovered evidence was proof that one of his predecessors, John Bunyan, was not a Baptist but a Congregationalist two hundred years earlier. Geoffrey Nuttall, in his fine study of *Visible Saints: The Congregational Way, 1640-1660*, states

'The Congregational way', as it was then called, is not to be taken as in all points identical with what is now [1957] known as Congregationalism, though this has evolved from it and possesses much in common with it. It is larger than any denomination in the modern sense. It is, rather, an interpretation of the gospel and a doctrine of the Church.⁵

J. W. Ashley Smith provides a useful perspective on what was taking place in Bedfordshire in Bunyan's lifetime. While this phrase is lifted from Ashley Smith's discussion of a history of the dissenting academies, his comment is a reflection upon an earlier time when he speaks of a period

long before the original Congregational movement had separated on the Baptist issue and so at a time when the spiritual predecessors of the Particular Baptists were denominationally indistinguishable from the Congregationalists.⁶

Thus we need to examine how the author and preacher John Bunyan understood the gospel and something of his doctrine of the church and sacraments. Let us approach this matter in three steps: first, Bunyan's initiation into the Bedford religious community; second, the succession of early pastors and their tradition at the Bedford meeting house; third, Bunyan's controversy with the Particular Baptists over the issue of open communion.

Bunyan records his own spiritual pilgrimage in his *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, printed in 1666. It is a record of an individual wrestling with his doubts and remorse; the catalogue of a long travail marked by recurring despair and innumerable crises. This spiritual diary demonstrates a long period of stress filled storms occasionally relieved when divine love broke through the dark of the psychological clouds. Bunyan recounted how he had come to where three or four women were 'sitting at a door in the sun, talking about the things of God'.⁷ Their conversation was about a new birth, the work of God in their hearts. These women of humble means were members of Mr Gifford's church in Bedford. Tradition holds that it was John Gifford who baptized Bunyan in the River Ouse, a short walk from the present bridge. All of the biographers agree that there was a baptism of Bunyan in his mature years. Ivimey gives the year of baptism as 1653 and Bunyan's age as twenty-five. Robert Philip in 1839 follows Ivimey, as do Henri Talon in 1951 and 1956 and Gordon Rupp in 1957. Charles Doe, responsible for editing and publishing

Bunyan's works posthumously, cites the baptismal year as early as 1651, but also admits it may have been a year of two later. 'The Continuation of Bunyan's Life', printed in the Seventh Edition, 1692, of *Grace Abounding* and attributed by Brown to George Cokayne, Minister of the Independent congregation at Southwark, gives the year of baptism as 1655. This is the year favoured by Roger Sharrock, esteemed as a careful writer in such matters. However, since Sharrock bases his judgement in part on the *Minute Book* of the Bunyan Meeting which only commences in May of 1656, serious questions remain. Bunyan himself never mentions the baptism. All that can be said with certainty is that a tradition, from the earliest biographers, attests to Bunyan's baptism by John Gifford no earlier than 1651 and no later than 1655. All agree that Bunyan found a community of support in the Bedford congregation pastored by Gifford. Southey went so far as to declare 'had it not been for the encouragement Bunyan received from the Baptists, he might have lived and died a Tinker'.⁸ A reading of *Grace Abounding* supports this judgement. Talon describes the critical value of the affirming community in these words:

membership of a group where his talents as a preacher were called upon helped Bunyan to regain his balance and to reflect the radiancy of the peace he had won.⁹

This brings us to the succession of pastors and their common tradition at the meeting house in Bedford. The first was John Gifford, who, according to the record, 'was the main instrument under God, in gathering them into Gospell-fellowship' Bunyan called him 'holy Mr Gifford'. Gifford left his mark upon many congregations in Bedfordshire. This remarkable man certainly left an indelible impact upon Bunyan's life and thought. Gifford counselled as a principle of the believers' fellowship together 'Faith in Christ; and Holiness of life, without respect to this or that circumstance, or opinion in outward and circumstantial things'. Gifford's insistence that 'union with Christ is the foundation of all saints communion: and not any ordinances of Christ, or any judgement or opinion about externals' was reflected in Bunyan's own writing of *Water Baptism No Bar to Communion*.¹⁰

John Gifford left a personal testament in which he cautioned the members of the Bedford congregation against divisions over externals.

Concerning separation from the church about Baptisms, laying on of hands, Anoynting with Oyls, Psalmes, or any externals, I charge everyone of you respectively, that none of you be found guilty of this great evil.

Gifford recognized the fissiparous tendencies of independent congregations and sought to prevent unnecessary occasions for break-aways. Gifford and his successor John Burton were moderate Baptists.¹¹ The evidence suggests that under Gifford and Burton, the Bedford congregation administered believer's baptism to those who desired it, but this was not a condition

for communion with the church. Only with Ebenezer Chandler, who succeeded Bunyan, did the congregation begin permitting infants to be baptized. In a letter, dated 23rd February 1691, Chandler wrote:

In pursuance of your request, I have here written an account of what the Church hath agreed for since my coming among them, that if I continue I may have my conscience clear towards God, and peace and comfort in my being with you.

... Again, with respect to baptism, I have my liberty to baptize infants without making it a business to promote it among others; and every member is to have his liberty in regard to believers' baptism, only to forbear discourse and debates on it that may have a tendency to break the peace of the Church.

... We do not mean to make baptism, whether of believers or infants, a bar to communion.¹²

While this evidence appears to have been overlooked by John Brown, F. M. Harrison in his 1928 revision of Brown's work corrected the oversight.

In 1672, after twelve years in prison, Bunyan was released. He was asked to serve as pastor of the Bedford congregation. In that year, he wrote *A Confession of My Faith*. It expressed his theological convictions with clarity. Near the end of it, he stated his belief that it was not proper to make the baptism of an adult by water the condition for admission into Christian fellowship. Bunyan stated his position in these words:

I believe Christ hath ordained but two [Ordinances] in His Church, viz., water baptism and the Supper of the Lord: both of which are of excellent use to the Church in this world; they being to us representative of the death and resurrection of Christ; and are, as God shall make them, helps to our faith therein. But I count them not the fundamentals of our Christianity, nor grounds or rule to communion with saints... It is possible to commit idolatry even with God's own appointments... To make that the door to fellowship which God hath not; yea, to make that the including, excluding charter, the bounds, bar and rule of communion; when by the words of the everlasting testament there is no warrant for it; to speak charitably, if it be not for want of love, it is for want of knowledge in the mysteries of the kingdom of Christ.¹³

It was the faith professed that made a person worthy for communion, not any outward act or religious ritual. Bunyan quoted St Paul:

For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh.

But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit and not in the letter. (Romans 2.28-29)

Bunyan similarly distinguished between the spirit and letter of baptism.

He that believeth in Jesus Christ... and is dead to sin... hath the Heart, Power and Doctrine of baptism; all then that he wanteth, is but the sign, the shadow, or the outward circumstance thereof.¹⁴

It is not surprising that in an age of printed tracts and theological controversy, Bunyan's *credo* should inspire quick and heated response. Henry Danvers was the first to assault Bunyan's position in a tract on baptism in 1673. Other 'strict-communion' Baptists from London joined in the attack. That same year, Thomas Paul and William Kiffin went into print with *Serious Reflections*. Bunyan replied to Kiffin and the others with his *Difference in Judgement About Water Baptism No Bar to Communion*, printed in 1673. Bunyan vigorously denied that he was belittling the ordinance of Baptism. He wrote

All I say is, that the Church of Christ hath not warrant to keep out of their communion the Christian that is discovered to be a visible saint by the word, the Christian that walketh according to his light with God... Shew me the man that is a visible believer and that walketh with God, and though he differ with me about baptism, the doors of the church stand open for him and all our heaven born privileges he shall be admitted to them.¹⁵

In its title, the third of Bunyan's contributions to the controversy reflected the author's desire for harmony. In 1674 Bunyan's tract, *Peaceable Principles and True* was published. Some time afterward, Kiffin was back in print with his *Sober Discourse of Right to Church Communion*, of which the earliest copy extant was printed in 1681. Bunyan referred to the various attempts made by the stricter Baptists of London to dissuade him from his more open views.

Assault, I say, upon this congregation, by times, for no less than 16 or 18 years, yea, myself they have sent for, and have endeavored to persuade to break communion with my brethren.¹⁶

As pastor in Bedford, Bunyan remained loyal to the liberal tradition inaugurated by Gifford. As such, the Bedford church was one of a group of Particular Baptist churches that shared a strict Calvinist theology common, as well, to Presbyterian and Congregational congregations of that time. Many of the Particular Baptists were strict, practising closed communion, limiting fellowship at the Lord's Table to

those who had been baptized as adults upon profession of faith, normally by immersion.

Bedford, however, from its foundation had been an open-communion congregation, allowing all who had experienced the saving knowledge of being in Christ to join at the solemn communion table. Bedford was open communion and it was open membership. For Bedford and for Bunyan, no truly converted Christian, whether baptized or not, should be barred from fellowship and communion. They accepted unbaptized believers provided that such persons demonstrated authentic repentance and an understanding of God's plan and work of salvation in Christ. The Bedford congregation was not alone in their practice. Broadmead Church in Bristol treated baptism as an open question after 1653, though by 1674 most of the members were baptized, yet the church was not exclusively Baptist until 1733. Henry Jessey's (d.1663) church at Southwark in London was another such congregation. The consequence of this was to place Baptists such as Bunyan and Jessey outside the mainstream of the Particular Baptists.

According to Baptist historian A. C. Underwood:

The controversy explains a great deal. It accounts for Bunyan styling himself as a Congregationalist in applying for licences under the Act of Indulgence of 1672. Those applications do not prove that Bunyan had adopted infant-baptism; they assert his neutrality on the question. The controversy also explains why Bunyan is claimed by both Congregationalists and Baptists; why his Bedford church finally became paedobaptist and why to this day the Bedfordshire County Union includes both Congregationalists and Baptists. More important still, the controversy explains why the man whom all the world knows, had so little influence upon his fellow-Baptists in his own lifetime.¹⁷

Michael Watts has called Bedford 'the most famous of all open membership churches'.¹⁸ The congregation still exists as The Bunyan Meeting. The effort to accommodate Baptists and paedobaptists in the same living fellowship has proven divisive at times. When a pastor was converted to Baptist views in 1773, for example, a part of its Congregational membership seceded. Similarly, twenty years later, nineteen Baptists left when a Congregational minister was appointed. Today the congregation retains the Gifford-Bunyan tradition. Members are not identified on the church roll by denomination. The Church is a full member of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland and remains in full fellowship with the United Reformed Church, formed in 1972 by a Union of Congregationalists and Presbyterians. The Bunyan Meeting gives financial support to the Baptist Union and the United Reformed Church and their missionary societies. All that the modern information sheet available to visitors states is that Bunyan was 'converted under Gifford's ministry'.

The Puritan leader Richard Baxter in 1675 wrote:

There are two sorts of men called Anabaptists among us: The one sort are sober Godly Christians, who when they are rebaptized to satisfie their consciences, live among us in Christian love and peace; and I shall be ashamed if I love not them as heartily, and own them as peaceably, as any of them shall do either me or better men than I, that differ from them. The other sort hold it unlawful to hold communion with such as are not of their mind and way, and are schismatically troublesome and unquiet, in labouring to increase their Party. These are they that offend me, and other lovers of peace.¹⁹

Richard Greaves argues that 'it is, in fact, pointless to attempt to identify [Bunyan] as either a thorough-going Baptist or a staunch Congregationalist in the light of his liberal views on the subject of baptism and church membership.²⁰ Greaves draws his reader's attention to the reply given by Bunyan when his critics pressed him to declare to which group he actually belonged. Bunyan responded

Since you would know by what Name I would be distinguished from others; I tell you, I would be, and hope I am, a Christian.²¹

In conclusion, what can be said about John Bunyan with great certainty? We certainly can say that John Bunyan was a Christian of great compassion, solidly Calvinistic in his theology. Evidence for this is in his own writings, from *Grace Abounding* down to his tracts in the controversy with Kiffin and the other strict Baptists.

We can also say with some certainty that he was baptized by John Gifford, as attested to by tradition, a tradition supported by the interchange between Bunyan and Kiffin and documented in the literature of the open-communion controversy. As Greaves concludes, 'As far as baptism by water was concerned, Bunyan was thoroughly at one with his Baptist controversialists',²² especially in Bunyan's insistence that only those should be baptized who had 'received the Doctrine of the Gospel' and who had convincingly demonstrated this by their confession of faith. The validity of the Gifford-Bunyan position was recognized in the appendix to the Regular Baptist Confession of 1677, also adopted by the Assembly in 1689, that read;

We are not insensible that as to the order of God's house and entire Communion therein, there are some things wherein we as well as others are not in full accord amongst ourselves, as for instance, the known principle and conscience of *divers of us* that have agreed in this confession, is such that we cannot hold Church Communion with any other than baptized believers, and Churches constituted of such, yet some *others of us* have a greater liberty and freedom in our spirits that way, and therefore

we have purposely omitted the mention of things of that nature, that we might concur in giving this evidence of our agreement, both among ourselves and with other Christians, in those important articles of the Christian religion mainly insisted on by us.¹

Bunyan, however, was not a signatory to this Confession. In resolving this question of affiliation, it is necessary to remember that Bunyan's ministry took place before the Congregationalists and Baptists emerged as recognizable denominations. It is also significant to recognize that he pastored a church that in its polity and ecclesiology resisted the pressure to be denominated as either Congregational or Baptist. In his ecumenical spirit and his evangelical zeal, Bunyan was marching to a different beat than his foes in controversy.

What conclusions regarding historiography may be drawn from this case study of Bunyan's church allegiance? The evidence would verify Christopher S. Hill's *caveat* that 'it is easy for historians looking backwards to think they see sharper lines of division than consciously existed at the time'. Bunyan refused to be drawn into sharp definitions, with their accompanying divisions, regarding the community of Christians with whom he was membered as part of Christ's body. This steadfast refusal should alert modern students of denominational history to avoid assuming such rigid demarcations as may be the case presently.

Hill, in the same article, warned against historians who cause 'considerable confusion ... in writing the history of their own sect' by drawing 'dividing lines more sharply than contemporaries would have done'. This present case demonstrates that John Brown, in writing the biography of Bunyan, did confuse the accepted description of his own denomination in the 19th century as applicable to Bunyan's congregation in the 17th century. Hill rightfully noted that in the 1650s 'many congregations would be described equally well as Congregationalist or Baptist'. The evidence noted in the present study supports Hill's judgement on this matter.

The situation in the 17th century was more fluid and less defined than our present denominational structures. These reflections upon Bunyan's relationship to modern-day Baptists and Congregationalists underlines the cogency of Hill's cautionary statement:

We need continued vigilance to preserve a historical attitude towards the evolution of worshippers who after 1662 became dissenters.²

NOTES

- 1 Albert Peel, *A Hundred Eminent Congregationalists, 1530-1924*, London, 1927; John Waddington, *Congregational History 1567-1700*, London, 1874; W. T. Whitley, *A History of British Baptists*, London, 1923; A. C. Underwood, *A History of English Baptists*, London, 1947, 1970.

- 2 John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, par.15.
- 3 Thomas Armitage, *A History of Baptists*, New York, 1887, p.496.
- 4 W. T. Whitley, 'The Bunyan Christening, 1672', *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society*, Vol.II, 1910-1911, pp.255-263.
- 5 Geoffrey Nuttall, *Visible Saints: The Congregational Way, 1640-1660*, Oxford, 1957, p.vii.
- 6 J. W. Ashley Smith, *The Birth of Modern Education, The Contribution of the Dissenting Academies*, London, 1954, p.200.
- 7 *Grace Abounding*, par.37.
- 8 Robert Philip, *The Life, Times and Characteristics of John Bunyan*, London, 1839, p.207; Robert Southey, *The Pilgrim's Progress With a Life of John Bunyan*, London, 1830.
- 9 Henri A. Talon, *John Bunyan*, London, Published for the British Council and the National Book League, 1956, p.10.
- 10 John Bunyan, *Differences in Judgement About Water-Baptism No Bar to Communion*, London, 1673.
- 11 John Jukes, *A Brief History of Bunyan's Church*, Bedford, 1849.
- 12 John Brown, *John Bunyan* (revised by Frank Mott Harrison), London, 1928, p.236.
- 13 *A Confession of My Faith*, Offor, Vol.III, pp.604, 613.
- 14 *Works*, II, p.609.
- 15 *Works*, Offor, III, pp.617, 641.
- 16 *Works*, Offor, II, p.618.
- 17 A. C. Underwood, *A History of English Baptists*, p.104.
- 18 Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters From the Reformation to the French Revolution*, Oxford, 1978, p.319.
- 19 Frederick J. Powicke, *A Life of the Reverend Richard Baxter, 1615-1691*, London, 1924, p.227.
- 20 Richard Greaves, *John Bunyan, Appleford, Abingdon, Berkshire: 1669*, p.22.
- 21 *Peaceable Principles and True*, Vol.II, p.103; cf. 'Do not have too much company with some Anabaptists, though I go under that name myself'. *Heavenly Footman, Works*, Offor, Vol.III, p.383.
- 22 Greaves, *John Bunyan*, p.23.
- 23 George Gould, 'A Discourse Delivered in St Mary's Chapel, Norwich: The Baptists in Norwich and Open Communion...3rd June 1860', London, 1860, p.2. (Angus Collection, Regent's Park College, Oxford, File Box: 5d6 item z). See also Ernest Payne, *Fellowship of Believers*, London, 1952, pp.77f.
- 24 Christopher Hill, 'History and Denominational History', *BQ* 22, 1967, pp.65-71.