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Bunyan's Departure from Preaching

Dr. Poe says that out of his interest in the use of media other than preaching to present the gospel today he was stirred to examine the way in which John Bunyan turned from preaching to another form of evangelism. His essay is based on his thesis on 'Evangelistic Fervency Among the Puritans in Stuart England, 1603–1688'.

When John Bunyan wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress* with an evangelistic purpose in mind, he departed from one of the most firmly held traditions among the Puritans. Bunyan's allegory was an exception to the Puritan dictum that God had chosen preaching as the chief and ordinary means of salvation. His imaginative book presented a method of proclaiming the gospel which violated the earlier Puritan concept of evangelism. In this context, Bunyan defended his innovation to others who stood in the Puritan tradition.

The Puritan View of Preaching

According to William Perkins, the principal concern of ministers was 'to deliver a man from going down to hell'.[1] Salvation and the assurance of one's salvation were the principal concerns of the Puritans who believed that preaching was the chief and ordinary means God had chosen for salvation. In *The Second Parte of a Register* the Puritans had argued that

> . . . an infinite number of your Majesty's subjects, for want of preaching of the word (the only ordinary mean of salvation of souls . . . without which the Lord God hath pronounced that the people must needs perish), have already run headlong into destruction.[2]

The Puritans believed that the evangelization of England, a country still clinging to the superstitious practices of popery which survived in the Prayer Book, depended upon preaching.

[1] John Brown, *Puritan Preaching in England: a Study of Past and Present* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), 76.

[2] Paul S. Seaver, *The Puritan Lectureships: The Politics of Religious Dissent, 1560–1662* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1970), 18.

When the House of Commons began to provide for lectureships in England and Wales after the overthrow of episcopacy they declared the necessity of preaching as 'the very way to bring People into a state of Salvation . . .'[3] With their dynamic doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the Puritans would never have denied that God might use other means to bring about salvation, but they were confident that preaching was the ordinary means. The assertion rang through the declarations of Puritans from the time of Elizabeth till the disintegration of Puritan solidarity in the Civil War.

Before the High Commission, John Penry criticized the non-resident ministry as 'odious' for depriving the people 'of the ordinary means of salvation; which was the word preached'.[4] In appointing a lecturer the Common Council of Gloucester called preaching 'the only ordinary means of salvation'.[5] John More, city lecturer at Norwich, warned the Justices of the Peace of Norfolk, 'if you will be saved, get you preachers into your parishes . . .'[6] The *Admonition* even declared that hearing the word preached has power for salvation which the mere reading of the word or of sermons lacks:

> Paule was not so wise as these politique men. When he sayde, we can not beleeve except we heare, and we can not heare without a preacher, etc, seing we may heare by reading and so beleve without a preacher.[7]

Because of the importance of preaching in salvation for the Puritans, they made the training and placement of preachers a primary focal point of their activity.

Some bishops were sympathetic to the Puritan fervency over preaching. Archbishop Grindal rebuked the Queen's suppression of preaching exercises when he reminded her that

> Public and continual preaching of God's word is the ordinary mean and instrument of the salvation of mankind.[8]

Grindal found himself imprisoned for such impertinence, however, and the Puritans faced a succession of bishops who did not appreciate their style of preaching. The Puritans' adversaries

[3] *Ibid.*, 20.

[4] *Ibid.*, 19.

[5] Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1964), 75.

[6] Seavers, 38.

[7] W. H. Frere and C. E. Douglas, eds., *Puritan Manifestoes* (London: S.P.C.K., 1954), 23.

[8] Edmund Grindal, *The Remains of Edmund Grindal, D. D.* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1843), 379.

under Archbishop Laud found God in the 'beauty of holiness' more than in the preaching of the word as the Puritans understood it.

The Puritans believed that the symbolism of the Laudian altar only reinforced the Roman soteriology that lingered in the English church. Laud had promoted the priority of the altar over the pulpit,

> . . . for there it is 'Hoc est Corpus Meum,' This is my body; but in the pulpit, it is at most but 'Hoc est Verbum Meum,' This is my word. And a greater reverence, no doubt, is due the body than to the Word of our Lord.[9]

Only sound doctrinal preaching could combat the ill effects of the symbolism the Puritans saw in the Prayer Book and the instructions of Laud. Not all preaching could meet this standard. Too many 'witty' preachers filled prominent pulpits, while too many 'plain' preachers were left without a benefice.

Witty preachers like John Donne and Lancelot Andrewes drew large audiences and fed them with word play, allusions to classical, patristic, and medieval writers, and elegant speech.[10] In his criticism of witty preachers Thomas Hooker remarked

I have sometime admired at this: why a company of Gentlemen, Yeomen, and poore women, that are scarcely able to know the A.B.C. Yet they have a Minister to speake Latine, Greeke, and Hebrew, and to use the Fathers, when it is certaine, they know nothing at all. The reason is, because all this stings not, they may sit and sleepe in their sinnes, and goe to hell hood-winckt . . .[11]

The Puritans and their heirs believed that witty preaching failed to strike the heart. Richard Baxter set himself to 'preach as a dying man to dying men; for drowsy formality and customariness doth but stupefy the hearers and rock them asleep.'[12]

Preaching was one of the principal entertainments in an age which had few preachers, whether Puritan or conformist. The Puritans considered witty preachers as self-seekers disinterested in conversion who lulled their congregations with false security in

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[9] William Prynne, *Canterburies Doome* (London, 1646), 520.

[10] Douglas Bush gives this 'witty' description: 'In prose as in verse wit involved not merely verbal tricks and surprises but the linking together of dissimilar objects, symbols, and ideas philosophized and fused by intellectual and spiritual perceptions and emotions, weighted by frequently abstruse or scientific learning, and made arresting by pointed expression.' See Douglas Bush, *English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century: 1600–1660* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), 310.

[11] Thomas Hooker, *The Soule's Preparation for Christ* (London, 1632), 66.

[12] Brown, 177.

order to gain a reputation. Thomas Goodwin sought such a reputation and preferment through scholarly and eloquent preaching until his own conversion after which he dedicated his preaching 'either for conversion of souls, or bringing them up to eternal life . . .'[13] Even Richard Sibbes, perhaps the most gentle and conciliatory of the Puritans, while giving great place to the sacraments and prayer, insisted upon the supremacy of the preaching of the word as a mark of the true church, 'for that is the seed of the new birth'.[14] Sibbes also charged that those who despise the preaching ministry despise Christ himself because the benefits which come from Christ are conveyed by preaching.[15]

The Elizabethan Puritans had opposed the printing and reading of sermons initially when the authorities distributed homilies to be read aloud by curates unskilled in preaching. The Puritans saw the homilies as a poor solution to the dearth of preaching. After William Perkins, however, the Puritans increasingly turned to the press as a means of propagating the gospel. Prior to Perkins the Puritans used the underground press primarily as a means of fostering controversial propaganda. Perkins, on the other hand, made salvation and the assurance of salvation within the framework of the reformed tradition the object of his work. The sermons and casuistry they began to produce brought a degree of respectability to the Puritans which opened the legal presses to them.

These books of sermons came to play an important role in the conversion of many people. Richard Baxter credited Richard Sibbes' *Bruised Reed* with being instrumental in his conversion. William Kiffin was influenced in his conversion by reading Thomas Goodwin's *A Childe of Light* and Thomas Hooker's *The Soul's Preparation for Christ*. No doubt Bunyan was encouraged in his writing by the memory that *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* and *The Practice of Piety* aroused in him an interest in religion.

Though Puritanism disintegrated over issues of ecclesiology and principles of biblical interpretation during the Civil War, the Puritan view of the place of preaching in conversion lived on in many of the groups that Puritanism spawned. Among the Calvinistic Baptists with whom Bunyan was associated when he wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the Puritan preaching tradition

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[13] Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin, D. D.*, II (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1861), lxv.

[14] Richard Sibbes, *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes, D. D.*, II (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1862), 242.

[15] *Ibid.*, III:372.

continued in attitude if not in scholarship. The London Confession of 1644 indicates the continuity in Puritan thought which the Baptists of Bunyan's day held with regard to the right method of evangelism: 'That faith is ordinarily begot by the preaching of the Gospel, or word of Christ . . .'[16]

Bunyan's Use of Allegory

In light of the strong prejudice for preaching as the chief and ordinary means of salvation among those in the Puritan tradition, Bunyan's achievements in the literary presentation of the gospel are remarkable. Bunyan's ability to write in such a creative mode is all the more remarkable since so many of the literary devices he employed were so strongly associated with the witty preachers. *The Pilgrim's Progress* not only departed from the traditional method of evangelism among the Puritans, it seemed more like something one of the witty preachers would have written. The inspiration for the experimentation came during Bunyan's imprisonment in Bedford Jail. Denied the traditional Puritan preaching ministry, yet labouring under the need to save souls, Bunyan discovered the value of creative writing for evangelism.

In deference to those like himself who stood in the Puritan tradition, Bunyan felt obliged to write an apology for the mode in which he wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*. He said that he had not set out to write an allegory, but that as he wrote about his contemporary scene a stream of metaphors came to his mind to describe the spiritual significance of the events. While such allegories had been popular as the product of the more sophisticated Arminian writers, the Puritans traditionally criticized 'dark figures', 'figures', 'similitudes', 'feigned words', 'metaphors', 'cloudy words', 'types', and 'shadows'.[17] Such devices had characterized the witty preachers as well as the decadent poets and dramatists of the Caroline and Restoration Court.

The tradition of allegorical writing even led some critics to charge Bunyan with plagiarism. In his epilogue to *The Holy War* Bunyan complained that 'Some say the Pilgrim's Progress is not mine.' Those who look for sources other than Bunyan's imagination have exhumed *Le Pélerinage de l'Homme* written by the French monk Guillaume de Guileville about 1300 and translated by William Caxton in 1483 as *The Pilgrimage of the Soule*. Others

[16] William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Rev. ed.; Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1969), 163.

[17] John Bunyan, *The Whole Works of John Bunyan*, III (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1977; reprint of Blackie & Sons, 1875 edition), 86.

claim Spenser's *Faerie Queen* as Bunyan's source. In reality, the allegory of life as a pilgrimage was a common religious idea in England by the time that Bunyan wrote. Whitney's 'Emblems' (1586), Herbert's 'Temple' (1633), and Quarles' 'Emblems' (1635) represent poetic expression of the pilgrimage idea before Bunyan.

While the ornate oratorical style belonged predominantly to the witty preachers, some Puritans did employ allegory. Thomas Goodwin's *A Childe of Light* describes a Christian's spiritual journey through life. The allegory of the pilgrim also appears in Thomas Taylor's *The Pilgrim's Profession.* Certain allegorical elements may also be found in Sibbes' *Bruised Reed.* Despite the allegorical elements, however, the Puritan experiments remained essentially sermonic in form. Bunyan's departure from preaching to story telling seemed too witty a thing for many of Bunyan's theological bedfellows.

At least one critic thought *The Pilgrim's Progress* so witty that he took measures to correct it. The unknown critic wrote *The Second Part of Pilgrim's Progress* in 1683 to be more theological and avoid the lightness of Bunyan. In the introduction to his own *Second Part* in 1684 Bunyan commented on the appearance of the counterfeit 'Pilgrim' and declared bluntly that a reading of the counterfeit would prove that it had not come from his pen. At the same time he acknowledged and answered several objections to the first Pilgrim. These criticisms struck primarily at the method Bunyan had chosen to present the gospel.

In attempting to use fiction as an evangelistic tool, Bunyan discovered that he had to satisfy two radically different criteria. The work had to be both theologically sound and literarily excellent. To succeed, the book had to be able to hold its own in the secular market place, because he aimed at reaching the secular reader with it. Yet its evangelistic call and theological framework had to be clear enough to succeed as an evangelistic tract. Bunyan found that some despised the book as too parochial while others complained that the meaning was too hidden by symbol to understand. These two problems continue to plague the Christian artist.

Biblical basis for creative writing

Bunyan defended his method despite its departure from the Puritan convention which relied on the plain preaching of the word for the conversion of sinners. Alluding to Christ's invitation to make his disciples fishers of men Bunyan wrote:

You see the ways the fisherman doth take
To catch the fish; what engines doth he make!
Behold! how he engageth all his wits;
Also his snares, lines, angles, hooks, and nets.

Yet fish there be, that neither hook nor line,
Nor snare, nor net, nor engine can make thine:
They must be grop'd for, and be tickled too,
Or they will not be catch'd, whate'er you do.[18]

To Bunyan the example of the fisherman implied the validity of a variety of methods to proclaim the 'honest gospel strains'.[19] Bunyan took pains to show that his method was not only not forbidden by Scripture, but that it was commended by Scripture. This argument was consistent with the oldest of Puritan hermeneutical principles in determining the right practice of the church: things ought to be done not contrary to and in accordance with Scripture.

Bunyan argued that the Bible itself contained the method he had employed in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. He explained that 'God's laws, His gospel-laws' had been expressed in ancient times 'by types, shadows, and metaphors'.[20] God expressed his 'highest wisdom' found in Scripture

. . . by pins and loops;
By calves and sheep; by heifers and by rams;
By birds and herbs, and by the blood of lambs . . .[21]

The Bible is full of parables and allegories. The prophets, Jesus, and the apostles used metaphors and parables. Though Paul forbade Timothy the use of 'old wives' fables', he did not 'forbid the use of parables'.[22] Rather than the prohibition of Scripture, Bunyan argued that he had the example of Scripture for his method.

Bunyan pointed to Christ as his example in the use of parables to convey truth as he warned his readers, 'do not slight the truth, because it is discovered in a parable.'[23] After all, Christ spoke many of his sayings, 'if not all, in parables'.[24] For those who criticized his use of literary imagination, Bunyan advised,

take heed of being a quarreller against Christ's parables, lest Christ also object against the salvation of thy soul at the judgment day.[25]

The tradition of allegorical preaching and the search for

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[18] *Ibid.*, 85.
[19] *Ibid.*, 87.
[20] *Ibid.*, 86.
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Ibid.*
[23] *Ibid.*, 674.
[24] *Ibid.*
[25] *Ibid.*

typologies in the Old Testament no doubt helped Bunyan justify his story telling. In *Solomon's Temple Spiritualized*, Bunyan explored the spiritual meaning of the Old Testament ceremonies, which he took to be 'but figures, patterns, and shadows of things in the heavens, and not the very image of the things . . .'[26] Bunyan believed along with others in the Puritan tradition that the gospel could be found 'clouded' in the ceremonies of the Old Testament.[27] Not only the 'Levitical law and temple', but the whole land of Canaan represented 'a type of heaven', and the crossing of the Jordan represented 'a similitude of our going to heaven by death'.[28] This imagery provides the very basis for the spiritual journey Bunyan elaborates in *The Pilgrim's Progress* through 'figures and shadows'.[29]

Though God had used types and shadows in the Bible which Bunyan took as license for him to use the same devices in proclamation, Bunyan repudiated the idea that men had the freedom to create 'out of their own fancies figures or similitudes to worship God by'.[30] The promotion of such invention had been Laud's great sin, as far as the Puritans were concerned, and Bunyan went dangerously close to doing the same thing with proclamation that Laud had done with worship. In worship, Bunyan condemned the invention of symbol by men:

> For though they had his blessing when they worshipped him with such types, shadows, and figures, which he had enjoined on them for that purpose, yet he sorely punished and plagued them when they would add to these inventions of their own.[31]

Though Bunyan did not discuss the inconsistency, he drew a practical distinction between the invention of symbol for worship and the invention of symbol for proclamation.

Bunyan's audience

Bunyan thought that his style of writing would reach an audience that never heard the plain preaching of the Puritans. He wanted to evangelize the sophisticated and carnal Englishmen who looked for 'truth within a fable', for those who 'read riddles' and 'love picking meat', and for those who read in order to find diversion.[32] He hoped that he did not offend any 'man of God' with his method, but he did not write primarily for Christians. He wrote evangelistically in *The Pilgrim's Progress* by demonstrating the life's journey of one that attains 'the everlasting prize'.[33] The book

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[26] *Ibid.*, 464.
[27] *Ibid.*
[28] *Ibid.*, 462.
[29] *Ibid.*, 422–423.
[30] *Ibid.*, 463.
[31] *Ibid.*
[32] *Ibid.*, 87.
[33] *Ibid.*

> . . . shows you whence he comes, whither he goes,
> What he leaves undone; also, what he does;
> It also shows you how he runs and runs.
> 'Till he unto the gate of glory comes.[34]

The book also shows those that do not attain the prize and gives the reasons why. By giving such a parabolic demonstration, Bunyan believed that

> This book will make a traveller of thee,
> If by its counsel thou wilt ruled be;
> It will direct thee to the Holy Land,
> If thou wilt its directions understand . . .[35]

Bunyan wrote to explain to the ungodly the 'journey, and the way to glory'.[36] This evangelistic intent motivated him to move beyond the conventional literary forms and methods for presenting the gospel and helped him seize upon a method that might capture the imagination.

Bunyan said that he wrote *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman* 'to stop a hellish course of life, and to "save a soul from death." '[37] He wrote to save individuals, but like the prophets of old, Bunyan's message had an implication for the whole national scene. He saw 'wickedness, like a flood', about 'to drown our English world'.[38] Through his writing Bunyan hoped to play a part in stemming the flood of debauchery.[39]

In *A Few Sighs from Hell* Bunyan again wrote evangelistically to prevent people from falling into hell.[40] In defending his use of literary invention to work salvation, Bunyan said 'that though it be a parable, yet it is a truth, and not a lie . . .'[41] To those who claimed that 'parables are no realities', Bunyan countered,

> parables are wonderful realities. O what a glorious reality was there signified by that parable, 'The kingdom of heaven is like unto a net that was cast into the sea,' &c. [42]

Bunyan believed that a parable had the power of expressing reality in such a way that people would appropriate that reality for their own.

The mirror of words

By telling a story in figurative language, Bunyan believed that he could show people themselves as though they were looking in a mirror. In *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman* Bunyan used

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[34] *Ibid.*
[35] *Ibid.*
[36] *Ibid.*, 85.
[37] *Ibid.*, 592.
[38] *Ibid.*, 592–593.
[39] *Ibid.*, 593.
[40] *Ibid.*, 673.
[41] *Ibid.*, 674.
[42] *Ibid.*

dialogue rather than narrative to tell the story. He intended to involve the reader in the story

> . . . that thou mayest, as in a glass, behold with thine own eyes the steps that take hold of hell; and also discern, while thou art reading of Mr. Badman's death, whether thou thyself art treading in his path thereto.[43]

Discovering that some situations call for analogy to make clear, Bunyan believed that his style of presentation could better relay his message to the average man because of the way parable tends to mirror and relive personal experience.

In his introduction to *The Pilgrim's Progress* Bunyan declared,

> Wouldest thou remember
> From New Year's Day to the last of December?
> Then read my fancies, they will stick like burs,
> And may be to the helpless comforters.[44]

The power of story telling is its ability to draw people into the story where they see themselves and identify with the story. Rather than hiding or obscuring his message, Bunyan declared that his method

> Informs the judgment, rectifies the mind;
> Pleases the understanding, makes the will
> Submit; the memory, too, it doth fill
> With what doth our imaginations please;
> Likewise, it tends our troubles to appease.[45]

In his introduction to 'One Thing is Needful', Bunyan expressed his belief that objective truth, expressed in a dramatic form, lent itself to appropriation by the reader:

> Let all therefore that read my lines,
> Apply them to the heart:
> Yea, let them read, and turn betimes,
> And get the better part.[46]

Bunyan believed that the skilful use of imaginative story telling could bring self-awareness.

In *A Book for Boys and Girls* Bunyan used a poetic format to compare the conduct and vanity of adults with the behaviour of children. To avoid any misunderstanding, Bunyan gave a poetic interpretation for each of the nursery rhymes he created. In the preface he explained his intention:

> Wherefore, good reader, that I save them may,
> I now with them the very dotterel play.[47]

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[43] *Ibid.*, 590.
[44] *Ibid.*, 87.
[45] *Ibid.*, 86.
[46] *Ibid.*, 726.
[47] *Ibid.*, 748.

Once again Bunyan wrote evangelistically and defended his method by pointing to the facility with which figurative forms help people see themselves. He said that he wrote as he did, 'All to show them they are girls and boys.'[48]

This stress on self-understanding comes from Bunyan's doctrine of conviction. Bunyan's allegorical and figurative writings serve primarily as a mirror in which people may see themselves in their own spiritual condition. By holding up their lives to people through reading his stories, Bunyan hoped people would appropriate what they saw of themselves and fall under conviction.

Conclusion

Despite Bunyan's departure from preaching as the chief and ordinary means of salvation, he did not forsake preaching. Throughout his life he saw himself principally as a preacher. His writing had provided a vehicle for conveying the gospel while he was in prison, but he was in prison because he insisted upon preaching. His need to proclaim the gospel, however, gave birth to his literary evangelism.

The lasting quality of *The Pilgrim's Progress* probably rests to a great extent on Bunyan's willingness to let the story speak for itself without forcing a sermonic invasion upon it. Bunyan seemed to appreciate to different capacities of different literary forms and he did not force his literary inventions to carry what they could not bear. He never ceased to appreciate the exalted virtues of the sermon, but he realized that they differed from the virtues of allegory and poetry.

Bunyan serves as a model for Christians seeking to use a variety of genres in the proclamation of the gospel. Many twentieth century Christian writers and film makers fail to understand the distinction between polemic, sermon, lecture, story, and parable. Rather than constructing a parable in which people can see themselves, as Bunyan did, too many writers tell a story containing sermonettes and lectures on the Christian life. Bunyan saw the parable as a tool in bringing conviction, and he was willing for it to stand or fall on its own merits without resort to a sermon to prop it up.

Bunyan also serves as a reminder that no methods are sacrosanct for all time. With each new generation come new possibilities for proclaiming the gospel. Bunyan was willing to speak in terms his Restoration culture was able and willing to understand.

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[48] *Ibid.*