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John Gibbs, 1627-1699.

THE Bedford tinker's son and his book will never be forgotten. The memory of his preaching and imprisonments is cherished because of his book, though for their own sake they deserve the honour of posterity. The Bedford cooper's son wrote no *Pilgrim's Progress*, but the glory of the ministry and sufferings of John Bunyan's associate should not be allowed to dim with the passing of the centuries.

The fathers of John Bunyan and John Gibbs, Thomas Bunyan the tinker and Samuel Gibbs the cooper, were probably well known to each other; for 300 years ago the population of Bedford and Elstow was not above 2,500; and their trades are not so widely separated as to rule out the possibility of a business contact.

In 1627 John Gibbs was born, and in the next year John Bunyan. Of the relationship in their childhood we know nothing definite. Dr. Brown, in his life of Bunyan, points out that if the "Scriptural Poems," published in 1700 in the name of Bunyan were genuine, it would end the uncertainty regarding his schooldays, and would show that he had attended the Grammar School founded by Sir William Harpur, where William Varney was master. In any case Bunyan might have gone there, and John Gibbs almost certainly went there, though in the one known reference to his schooldays the master's name appears as "Varnill." It is a matter of interesting speculation whether these two who were afterwards so closely associated had been school chums. If they were, neither of them had very happy times, for a petition referring to a date about 1640 complains that William Varney, the schoolmaster, had not only charged fees which he had no right to do, but had also grossly neglected the school by frequent absence from it, by night-walking, and mis-spending his time in taverns and ale-houses, and was also very cruel to the boys, when present.

On November 30th, 1644, on his sixteenth birthday, John Bunyan was drafted into the army. The muster rolls of the Newport Pagnell garrison show that he served in the Parliamentary Army, and was with the garrison for two and a half years. The soldiers in the town were greatly influenced by the Puritans living there, and Bunyan, as yet unconverted, was already in touch with the very circle to which John Gibbs should

shortly minister, and whose sufferings in after years he himself should share.

Seven months after John Bunyan went to Newport, John Gibbs, on June 26th, 1645, now seventeen years of age, was admitted as a sizar to Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. The same year he matriculated, and in the session 1647-1648 obtained his B.A. degree.

In 1648 the Rev. Samuel Austin, M.A., Vicar of Newport Pagnell, was "thrust out" by Cromwell's party. The Vicarage was still empty in 1650, but either late in that year or very soon afterwards, John Gibbs was appointed in Austin's place.

John Gibbs was an ardent opposer of "Infant Baptism"; but, like Bunyan, he did not believe in a church that made baptism obligatory, though it should be noted that their adversaries always regarded both of them as "Anabaptists."

In Newport Pagnell there had already been a bitter controversy concerning Infant Baptism, and Captain Paul Hobson, afterwards Chaplain at Eton, had been put in custody for preaching against it; and John Gibbs was no sooner settled there than he had a public dispute on the question in his Church with one Richard Carpenter. This extraordinary man was Jesuit, Episcopalian, or Independent, as it suited his convenience. When the dispute ended, both sides claimed to have had the best of the argument, but Carpenter was not satisfied until he had proclaimed his supposed victory to the world, which he did by publishing his own version of the affair in a book entitled *The Anabaptist Washt, and Washt and Shrunk in the Washing*. The British Museum copy of this book has the date 1653 added to the title page in ink, and it is probable that the dispute took place about 1652.

In January 1656/7 the Trustees for the Maintenance of Ministers settled upon Gibbs an augmentation of £40 for his better maintenance and encouragement.

Though he was Vicar, Gibbs did not accept the Episcopalian position, for he was a Congregationalist as far as his Church practice was concerned. This was not unusual in Commonwealth times. Five such Churches and their Rectors were already in close touch with one another. These were St. John the Baptist, Bedford; where John Gifford was Pastor until his death in 1655, when John Burton succeeded him; Pertenhall, Cranfield, Yelden, and Newport Pagnell, which were under the care of John Donne, William Wheeler, William Dell, and John Gibbs respectively.

These men acted together on May 13th, 1653, when an important document was sent up to Cromwell signed by them and several of their Church members. It was a return of two

men (Nathaniell Taylor and John Croke), to be Members of Parliament for the County of Bedford in Cromwell's "Little," or "Saints'" Parliament. When the Bedfordshire Union of Baptist and Congregational Churches was formed in 1797 it was but a new beginning of an Association which had existed as far back as 1653.

The association of these churches, and especially the link between Newport Pagnell and Bedford, appears to have facilitated the commencement of Bunyan's literary career; for his first book, *Some Gospel Truths Opened*, has it specially stated on the title page that it is to be "sold by Mathias Cowley, Bookseller in Newport Pagnell, 1656"; whilst Bunyan's third book, *A Few Sighs from Hell*, has prefixed to it an address to the reader believed to have been written by John Gibbs, for it is signed with the initials J.G. The writer reveals in it an earnest passion for saving lost souls, and a contempt for the worldly rich who despise the wealth of the other world; but it is perhaps most interesting as showing Gibbs' appreciation of Bunyan. "I verily believe," he writes, "that God hath counted him faithful, and put him into the ministry, and though his outward condition and former employment was mean, and his human learning small, yet is he one that hath acquaintance with God, and taught by His Spirit."

After further praising the soul-winning work of Bunyan, and his industry in the Master's service, he adds, "And I fear that is one reason why the Archers have shot so sorely at him."

This hint of trouble was the first threatening of the coming storm. Both Gibbs and Bunyan were shortly to face severe persecution and imprisonments.

It is apparent from the Bedford Meeting minutes that the fellowship of these men and their churches was mutually helpful. In 1658 we find the Bedford church appointing some of its members (including Burton and Bunyan), to meet Donne, Wheeler, and Gibbs "for the continuing of unity, and preventing of differences among the congregations," and "to consider of some things that may conduce to love and unity amongst us all." Two years later, when Burton was taken ill, the assistance of the same three brethren, together with Bro. Breedon, was sought "in the work of God in preaching and breaking bread once every moneth . . . on the Lord's dayes during the time of his weakness." The latter part of that year (1660) began to bring sorrow to the churches. John Burton died, John Bunyan was thrown into prison, the Bedford Church was robbed of its home, and John Gibbs was ejected from the Church at Newport Pagnell.

How far the ejection of Gibbs was due to political

influence is not known. It was certainly not the main cause, but it may have played its part, as the following incident will show. In 1659 Sir George Booth headed an insurrection in Cheshire against Parliament. He was defeated by General Lambert, and fled as far as Newport Pagnell; "whither he came, with four servants, and behind one of them himself rode in the habit of a woman, but acting that part not well, he was suspected, and being apprehended and examined, he confessed himself to be Sir George Booth."

Upon Booth's arrest John Gibbs took horse and rode to London, to communicate the earliest intelligence of this event to Parliament; and as the House was then sitting, he was called in, and at the Bar gave an account of the apprehending of Sir George Booth, and "made application to many of the Parliament and Council by his friends for favour." This was on August 24th, 1659. Sir George Booth was sent up to London, and by the Parliament committed to the Tower, and a pecuniary reward was voted to Gibbs and the others concerned. At the Restoration Sir George Booth was created Lord Delamere. He was a man of very bitter spirit, and it is possible that he may have had some part in the ejection of Gibbs. The last official signature of Gibbs in the Newport Pagnell Parish Register was on August 14th, 1659. His successor, Rev. Robert Marshall, was inducted on March 24th, 1660, so that the ejection took place some time between these dates. Nominally Gibbs was turned out for refusing to admit the whole parish to the Lord's Table. The truth appears to be that John Gibbs conscientiously refused to give the ordinance to a wealthy and influential parishioner who was a drunkard and a notoriously immoral character. Excluded from his pulpit in the Church, Gibbs commenced preaching in a barn in the High Street of Newport, where he had a numerous following.

The bonds of church fellowship were not broken by these sorrows, but rather the links between Bedford, Newport and the other churches were strengthened. We find Wheeler, Donne, and Gibbs meeting with the Bedford Church in December 1660 to consider the appointment of a successor to John Burton, and William Wheeler was invited to the Pastorate. (It is curious that though Rector of Cranfield, he was regarded as a member of Mr. Gibbs' church.) He did not accept the invitation, for the full fury of the storm of persecution broke upon them in 1662, and it seemed advisable for him to help his own people.

If John Gibbs had not been ejected in 1660, he would have been on August 24th, 1662, for on that day, with the passing of the "Act of Uniformity," the two thousand ministers went out "not knowing whither they went," sacrificing their office and

their livelihood. Amongst them were the associates of John Gibbs:—William Wheeler, John Donne, and William Dell.

Before long Wheeler, Donne, and three-score Dissenters besides, were with Bunyan in Bedford Gaol; whilst at Aylesbury the common gaol was so full that the magistrates were compelled to hire two large houses to receive their prisoners. John Gibbs did not escape, but was subjected to ill-treatment, indignities, hardships, and imprisonments, all of which he faced with a determined and cheerful spirit.

The Conventicle and Five Mile Acts of 1664 and 1665 drove the Dissenting congregations to meet at Olney, Newton Blossomville, and other places. In such preaching services the Olney Baptist cause had its commencement. On the expiration of the Conventicle Act in 1668, meetings were held openly, to the scandal of the bishops. So at the request of Archbishop Sheldon, the Clergy of the Province of Canterbury forwarded to him reports of all "unlawful religious assemblies" in 1669. The name of John Gibbs appears in three of them.

"Newport Pagnell; two meetings; one, Anabaptist; number, uncertain; inferior tradesmen and mechanical people; led by John Child, William Breeden, and John Gibbs ejected hence."

"Olney; two meetings; one, Anabaptist, at the house of Widow Tears; number, about 200, but decrease; meane people; led by Mr. Gibbs, one Breendon, and James Rogers, lace buyers, and one Fenne, a hatter."

"Newton Blossomville; one, in private houses; 50 or 60 meane people, but such as say they value not his Majesty's clemency a pin; led by Gibbs an Anabaptist ejected at Newport Pagnell."

Of those mentioned in these reports it is worth noticing that three (Child, Rogers, and Fenne) probably belonged to Bedford; Breendon was a Newport tradesman.

The Buckinghamshire Quarter Session records do not go back beyond 1678, so that there is very little means of knowing what took place before the first Declaration of Indulgence.

The prison doors were thrown open in 1672, and under the terms of the "Declaration of Indulgence" Bunyan made application for many licences. The list of names includes, besides his own, those of John Donne, John Fenne, James Rogers; and also "John Gibbs, for William Smyth's barn and his own house in Newport Pagnell"; and "William Hensman, for Joseph Kent, his barn in Olney." For three years the churches had liberty. But the licences were recalled and the persecution began again in 1675.

The second period of persecution is better known. At the

Christmas Session of 1682, and at every subsequent Session until that of Christmas 1685, the great majority of summonses were for non-attendance at Church. First of all the nonconformists were summoned for three months' absence from Church; but, later on, three Sundays' absence was the crime that brought them to judgment; and during those years an average of ten or eleven from Newport, and seven or eight from Olney had to appear each quarter. The records have folio after folio of the names of hundreds of persons, chiefly men, from all parts of the county, who for conscience' sake, refused to comply with the law and attend the Established Church of England. John Gibbs' name appears no less than seven times in three years.

The official records naturally make no distinction between Quakers, Baptists, and Independents, but there is a large proportion of the Newport Pagnell and Olney people who are known from other sources to have belonged to John Gibbs' Church. The meeting at Joseph Kent's barn in Olney appears to have been raided in 1684, for at the Midsummer Session, forty people (and Joseph Kent amongst them), were summoned for attending an unlawful assembly at Olney. They were mostly fined 6s. 8d. each, but some were fined 10s., and one as much as £1; which, considering the value of money at that time, was by no means a light sentence.

About this time the Dissenters of the district frequently met at a farmhouse at Northey, about three miles distant from Olney. Whether this place of meeting was chosen as a direct result of the raid on Joseph Kent's barn, or whether they had previously met there, we do not know. The meeting place was only a few yards from "Three Counties' Point," where Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire, and Buckinghamshire adjoin. Here Bunyan and Gibbs preached; and here, when they were persecuted in one County, they could flee into the next.

After the persecution ended in 1688, William Smyth's barn in Newport Pagnell and Joseph Kent's barn in Olney became the home of the two congregations, and John Gibbs devoted the remainder of his days to consolidating the work in these places, and on each site new meeting houses took the place of the old barns.

As it has already been pointed out, the views of John Gibbs and John Bunyan on Baptism seem to have been identical; for, whilst they believed in Baptism, they considered Open Membership and Independency as of greater consequence. In the old Church Book at Bedford, Gibbs is called a "Catabaptist"; but as Dr. Whitley points out, the terms "Anabaptist" and "Catabaptist" were used quite indifferently; and therefore give no clue to any particular view of Baptism. It is clear that John

Gibbs did not accept the "Strict Baptist" position, nor the "Paedobaptist" view; for a "Strict Baptist" communion arose in his day in Newport, and a "Paedobaptist" in Olney. His sympathy, however, was always with the Baptists. It is recorded that he encouraged their work in Newport, and that he loved these people and wished to have them settled in Church estate.

On the other hand it is plain from the Rothwell Church Minutes that there was very little sympathy between the two causes in Olney; and the attitude of John Gibbs, in accepting Open Membership whilst not accepting Infant Baptism, is the only one that reconciles statements in the Olney Trust Deed of 1694, and the division that occurred in the Church some years after the death of Gibbs. The Trust Deed speaks of the congregation as "Independent or Protestant Dissenters"; and according to its terms no one can preach, pray, or perform any religious worship or service, in the assemblies, or on the premises, unless they agree with John Gibbs. Matthias Maurice, a Welshman, later succeeded to the pastorate, and as he was a Paedobaptist, and evidently could not accept the teaching of John Gibbs, he left the Church with a large number of his supporters, and went to the Paedobaptist Meeting House, where Richard Davis of Rothwell had begun preaching services in 1691, and which had since that year existed as a branch of the Wellingborough, Sheep Street, Independent Church. The Baptists, apparently knowing that their view coincided with that of John Gibbs, retained the older Meeting House, and though much reduced in number, bravely determined to carry on the work.

Toward the end of his life, John Gibbs seems to have become increasingly impressed with the great mysteries of life, death, and eternity; and between 1697 and 1699 published several short treatises on these subjects, as well as two funeral sermons. The treatises are entitled:—"An Exhortation Against the Fears of Death," and "A Brief Declaration of the Resurrection of the Dead." Bound up with these is "A Discourse on the Four Last Things:—On Death, which is most certain; on Judgment, which is most strict; on Hell, which is most dismal; and on Heaven, which is most delightful." The two funeral sermons have also been preserved. One was for William Maxwell, who died in 1697 when a student at Harvard College, Cambridge, New England; and who was possibly his grandson; the other was for William Hartley, an Apothecary, who died in 1698, and who also was his kinsman.

John Gibbs died on June 16th, 1699, being then in his seventy-second year, and was buried in the parish Church at

Newport Pagnell. His will reveals the fact that he had been married, and that his wife and four daughters survived him.

On the death of Gibbs a quaint elegy was published, and also an acrostick on his name. Both of these show how highly his life and ministry were valued by his own people. The inscription on his tomb, whilst it gave him highest praise, does not seem to have been an extravagant summary of his character. It declared him to be:—"A man of well cultivated mind, wonderful memory, acute judgment, and great learning, as well as of eminent piety and great integrity; a fervent preacher to saints and sinners." In the Newport Pagnell Congregational Church and in the Olney Baptist Church, the work which he began still continues and flourishes.

MAURICE F. HEWETT.

JOHN GIBBS, 33-697. A funeral sermon preached at Newport Pagnell, April 11th, 1697. On the occasion of the sudden death of William Maxwell, a pious and hopeful young scholar, belonging to Harvard College, in Cambridge, New England. This was published in Cornhill, London. The preface shows that Maxwell was a relation of Gibbs. As Oxford and Cambridge were closed to dissenters, the choice for a higher education lay between the Academies run by university graduates, without the university tone, and foreign universities, such as St. Andrew's and Leyden. Hollis, the Baptist Mæcenas in London, saw the possibilities that attached to Harvard's college in New England, and endowed it for two professors; with scholarships, also, preferentially for Baptists. Young Maxwell seems to have been one of the earliest to go from England—or Scotland?—across the Atlantic for his training. It was a fine idea to link together the two hemispheres, as Rhodes has seen for an even wider constituency.

FROME had Baptists as early as 1669, but till 1692 they were on the roll of Southwick. Forty then organized and called John Sharp of Northampton. A group separated about 1700, the main body built in 1711 on Badcox lane. Sharp was sent by the Western Association to stand for orthodoxy in 1719 at Salters' Hall. Five years later his son helped him, till he died 1724. The father saw two secessions, but when Thomas Hurne from Crockerton succeeded in 1740, he gathered back the earlier group. Abraham Larwill followed, 1749-1760. John Kingdon followed, saw the second secession disband, had 160 members in 1775. Eleven years later, in a period of revival, he won a Calvinistic Methodist minister and all his congregation.