

Bunyan's Conception of the Seat of Authority in Religion.

THE little book in which Bunyan gives the account of how he was apprehended, and of his examination before Justice Keelin and others, called *A Relation of the Imprisonment of John Bunyan*, is well known as a characteristically clear and vigorous presentation of his case. It contains a very useful indication of what he regarded as the seat of authority in religion, all the more valuable because it is incidental. It is the authority which he accepted in *practice*, whatever his reasoned and philosophical doctrine may have been.

The relevant passage is the account of his discourse with the amiable and neighbourly Mr. Cobb, clerk to the peace, who had been sent to admonish him, and particularly to plead with him to modify his position in view of the approaching Quarter Sessions. The two points at issue were why he refused the Prayer Book, and why he persisted in preaching in conventicles, the later being, of course, the serious charge. With regard to both matters Bunyan takes his stand on the duty of obeying God rather than men, aptly quoting Wickliffe to the effect "that he which leaveth off preaching and hearing of the Word of God for fear of excommunication of men, he is already excommunicated of God, and shall, in the day of judgment be counted a traitor to Christ." (May not this, by the way, be an interesting side-light as to Bunyan's spiritual ancestry, as it is certainly testimony to the long reach of the influence of Wiclif?) The law of God is, of course, contained in the Scriptures, and it is to them every time that Bunyan appeals. Cobb had suggested that Bunyan might be willing to accept the judgment of two "indifferent persons," who should determine the case. To this the preacher replied, "Are they infallible?" and on receiving the answer, "No," added, "Then it is possible my judgment may be as good as theirs." On the other hand, he is sure that the Scriptures are infallible and cannot err, and he will readily obey if anyone can show that he has acted contrary to the Word.

Cobb, who is shrewd, as well as sincere, raises the real issue in the very pertinent question, "Who shall judge between you, for you take the Scripture one way and they another."

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Bunyan's answer to that, though of necessity short and incomplete in a conversation of this kind, is well worth considering in view of present controversies. He admits that *the truth which is in the Scripture has to be arrived at*, and says that we come at it by comparing one Scripture with another. "It will open itself if it be rightly compared." The two points to notice are the external authority given to the Word, but also the admission that the word has of necessity to be opened, and the opening of it implies method and qualities in the individual. Moreover, it is a case where the individual, as against the Church, has his inalienable rights.

Curiously enough, he says nothing here about the guidance of the Spirit, although, in his previous examination he falls back on that almost entirely as his ground for rejecting the Prayer Book.

Whether he worked out his doctrine to its logical conclusion or not, it would seem as though, for practical purposes, he combined the inner light view with that of the Book. The Bible is the basis on which he works, but he insists on his right to work on it. He uses his own mind and judgment as to interpretation. If we judge him rightly, he would be against the crude literalist, whose prejudice leads him to settle every question by quoting a text. On the other hand, he would draw away from the purely subjective, holding that it is not in these affairs just a matter of opinion. He seems to reach out at least to the position which finds the seal of authority in the general sense of Scripture, as that is apprehended by the enlightened mind of the converted man. So that if we ask him how we are to know, he would say, by bringing the spirit in our hearts to incite the Spirit in the Book, as the two qualifications being a Bible we can read and a heart and mind cleansed to see and believe. Without the Bible we are hopeless, and without the experience of conversion we are equally blind. It is not the Bible alone, nor reason alone, but a combination of the two. If that is his position, then he was wonderfully modern, and present-day Baptists might certainly do worse than start from his point of view in their search for a doctrine of authority which will fit our present needs. Our problem also is to co-ordinate the objective and the subjective, to safeguard the legitimate freedom of the individual mind, and yet to deliver from the vagaries and extravagances of pure subjectivism. We want an authority which is beyond us, and yet one that is essentially within. It must be the authority of truth, as truth strikes home to the truth-loving mind.