

Bunyan the Baptist.

THE anonymous "true friend and long acquaintance" of Bunyan who completed the narrative of the immortal dreamer's life from the point at which he himself stopped, by "piecing this to the thread too soon broke off" says that when Bunyan was converted "he was baptized into the congregation" at Bedford, "and admitted a member thereof." Charles Doe, himself a Baptist and a personal friend, who edited Bunyan's works immediately after his death, declares that he joined "the dissenting congregation of Christians at Bedford, and was on confession of faith baptized." George Offor tells us where the baptism took place. It was in a backwater of the river Ouse, near Bedford Bridge, at a spot then called (because the ordinance was frequently administered there) "The Ducking Place"—and the road that leads to it is still named by the Corporation of Bedford "Duck Mill Lane." There is no known record of the baptism anywhere—a good reason for that will be given later on—but the unbroken tradition is that the administrator was John Gifford, the reputed evangelist of the *Pilgrim's Progress*.

The unanimity with which writers, disinterested and various, on Bunyan call him a Baptist is remarkable. Thomas Scott, Dr. Stebbing, Macaulay, the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Froude, J. Richard Green, Dean Stanley, Robert Philip and Dr. Stoughton—to name only a few—all, in varying phrase, testify to the fact that he was immersed on profession of his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This was never seriously called in question, until the year 1885, when *John Bunyan: His Life, Times and Work*, by Dr. John Brown was published. It was not that Dr. Brown denied that Bunyan was a Baptist. Indeed, writing to Dr. Armitage under date, May 1st, 1886, he declares, "Looking at what he says of himself (*vide my Life of Bunyan*, page 238, line 6), I should say he was immersed, though there is no record of the fact." (Armitage's *History of the Baptists*, p. 483.) In his *John Bunyan*, however, Dr. Brown makes three extracts from the registers of the parishes of Elstow, and of St. Cuthbert's, Bedford, which are as follow:

"*Elstow*: Mary, the daughter of John Bunion, baptized, July 20th, 1650."

"Elizabeth, the daughter of John Bunyon, was born, 14th day of April, 1654."

St. Cuthbert's, Bedford, 1672: Baptized Joseph Bunyan, ye son of John Bunyan, Nov. 16th."

"There can be little doubt therefore," comments Dr. Brown, "that the year after John Bunyan joined the Bedford brotherhood, his second daughter, like the first, was baptized at Elstow Church. The third case, that of his son Joseph, is the most remarkable of all, for this child, according to the register, was baptized at St. Cuthbert's Church after Bunyan's twelve years' imprisonment for conscience sake, and during the time he was conducting the controversy on open communion with D'Anvers and Paul. The fact is curious, and can only be accounted for on the supposition that, upon the question of baptism, he had no very strong feeling any way." (Brown, p. 238.)

I have pointed out elsewhere (see *Baptist Times*, August 4th, 1927, Dec. 29th, 1927, Feb. 3rd, 1928) that the difference between the two Elstow entries—of the *baptism* of the one child in 1650, and the *birth* of the other in 1654—can be accounted for by two well-defined changes. One was a change in Bunyan's mind on the subject of christening, and the other a change in the law of the land on the question of registration. Bunyan joined Gifford's church in 1653; and in 1654 by one of the Cromwellian Acts of Parliament, he was entitled to register the birth of his child only—and he took full advantage of his right. With regard to the third entry, it is proved beyond all reasonable doubt in Armitage's *History of the Baptists* (pp. 493-506) that the Joseph Bunyan referred to was not the son, but the *grandson* of the immortal dreamer—the son of John Bunyan, Junr., who, ironically enough, appears to have been at that time, a member of the Church of England. He did not join his father's church until five years after his father's death. The doubt therefore, that Dr. Brown, by the foregoing extracts and comment, cast on the universal belief that Bunyan was anything but a Baptist may be regarded as blown to the winds.

Light on our subject may be obtained by examining the character of the Church of which Bunyan was first a member and afterwards the pastor. The earliest congregation of Nonconformists known to have gathered in Bedford was that ministered to by Benjamin Coke, "the son of Bishop Coke of the reign of Elizabeth, who came out of Devonshire, an innovater." (Edwards, *Gangrena*, p. 95.) Now Coke was undoubtedly a Baptist; for, not only was he one of the signatories of the London Confession of Faith, 1646 (first published in 1644), but he wrote an appendix to it, which reveals the fact that he was also a "close communion" Baptist (Art. XX. Appendix. Hanserd Knollys Library, vol. Confessions of Faith, pp. 57-59). His congregation, supposedly,

would form part of the church constituted by John Gifford in 1650. The records of that church begin only with the year 1656, and in the introduction state that there had long been persons in Bedford and neighbourhood, who had "by purse and presence" sought to edify one another according to the New Testament; and who were "enabled of God to adventure farre in showing their detestation of ye bishops and their superstitions." Further, this introduction declares that after they had conferred with members of other societies (most likely as I have suggested, that gathered by Coke among them) they formed themselves into a church and chose John Gifford "for their minister in Jesus Christ to be their pastor and bishop." "Now the principle," continues the introduction "upon which they thus entered into fellowship one with another, and upon which they did afterwards receive those that were added to their body and fellowship was ffaith in Christ and Holiness in life, without respect to this or that circumstantiall things." The fundamental requisition of "ffraith in Christ and Holiness in life" precluded the possibility of adding any "to their body and fellowship" by infant baptism; while their non-respect to opinion "in circumstantiall things" seems to imply that adult baptism was not made a condition of membership. It is rather significant too, that although there are a great many entries in the parish registers of Bedford relating to Gifford and his family—three daughters and a son were born to him—and although on the ejection of Theodore Crowley from the rectory of St. John's, Bedford for refusing to use the Directory, the Corporation appointed Gifford to succeed him (which appointment he held from 1653 till his death in 1655, his church, of course, meeting with him in St. John's) there is absolutely no vestige of record that any of his children were christened.

The famous letter which Gifford sent to the church from his death bed—and which, up to twenty years ago at least, was read annually to the church members—is a charge which, as Armitage says, "none but a Baptist church needed, and such as none but a Baptist pastor would have thought of giving to his Church" (6. 517). In the course of it he says, "concerning separation from the Church about baptism, laying on of hands, anointing with oil, psalms or any externals I charge every one of you respectively, as you will give an account of it to our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge both quick and dead at his coming that none of you be found guilty of this great evil." Now, with the exception of the last named, all the questions concerning which their dying minister was anxious, and on which his personal influence up to that time had kept them together, were distinctively Baptist questions. The singing of psalms in public worship

was not absolutely so, although Baptist Churches everywhere were agitated and greatly divided on it. The church at Bedford was. Indeed it was not till seven years afterwards—in 1697—that it granted “Lybertie to sing the praises of God in the morning of the Lord’s day as well as in the Afternoon.” The other three questions however—baptism, anointing with oil, and the laying on of hands—were questions that, at that time, engaged Baptist minds only (vide Armitage, pp. 517-521). If then, the majority of those in the membership of Gifford’s church were not Baptists, why was the dying pastor so anxious concerning these issues?

The church which Bunyan joined in 1653, therefore, was strongly Antipedobaptist. Dr. Stoughton calls it “a unique society. . . . The Church he” (Gifford) “founded was neither exclusively Baptist nor Pedobaptist: members of both kinds were admitted on the same terms . . . Bunyan was a Baptist.” That correctly describes it provided that, by the term “Pedobaptist,” Dr. Stoughton means no more than that some of the members had been received into fellowship without immersion; but if he implies by the term that infant baptism was practised in the church at that time, then the description is incorrect; for it was not until 1691—forty years after the Church was formed, and three years after Bunyan’s death—that the practice of infant christening was introduced there. (Jukes’s *History of Bunyan Church*, p. 27.)

The Church record abundantly shows that, on the question of Baptism, there was urgent need for Gifford’s dying charge. Continually it, and its relation to communion, kept cropping up; and it is significant to note that twice subsequently the church at “Bunyan Meeting” has been divided, to the point of suffering secessions, on the distinctive denominational principle. In these circumstances it can easily be understood why John Gifford, though he himself baptized Bunyan, did not keep a record of the event in the Church book. It was a matter of absolute necessity, for the maintenance of peace, that such a thing should not be done. Even to have kept two separate lists of members—immersed and not immersed—would have drawn a line directly through the church, which was the very thing they desired to avoid. The fact, therefore, on which Dr. Brown insists, that “there is no record of the fact” of Bunyan’s immersion is clearly explained.

I have said that the unanimity with which historians call him a Baptist is remarkable. Yet it is not so remarkable; for there is something in the make-up of Bunyan’s genius that allies his life so closely with Baptist principles that it has not escaped the

eye even of casual observers. Robert Philip with all his unfriendliness to Baptists sees this at a glance. He says:

"No one surely can regret that he was baptized by immersion. That was just the mode calculated to impress him—practised as it usually then was in rivers. He felt the sublimity of the whole scene at the Ouse, as well as its solemnity. Gifford's eye may have realised nothing on the occasion but the meaning of the ordinance, but Bunyan saw Jordan in the lilled Ouse, and John the Baptist in the holy minister, and almost the Dove in the passing birds; while the sun-struck waters flashed around and over him, as if the Shekinah had descended upon them. For let it not be thought that he was indifferent about his baptism because he was indignant against Strict Baptists, and laid more stress upon the doctrine it taught than upon its symbolic significancy. He loved immersion, although he hated the close communion of the Baptist Churches. . . . I think he did right in preferring immersion to sprinkling . . . because the former suited his temperament best, inasmuch as it gave him most to do, and thus most to think of and feel" (*Life and Times of Bunyan*, pp. 210, 211.)

Several passages in Bunyan's writings confirm this estimate of his view on Baptism. A few, perhaps, will suffice. Commenting on the words—and this is the way he quotes them—"Ye shall indeed endure the baptism (immersion in suffering) which I endure," he remarks, "That Scripture 'Do this in remembrance of me' was made a very precious word unto me when I thought of that blessed ordinance, the Lord's Supper, for by it the Lord did come down upon my conscience with the discovery of his death for my sins; and as I then felt, *plunged* me in the virtue of the same." On that Philip makes this comment: "There seems to me in this passage an intended use of terms which should express the views of both classes in his Church on the mode of baptism." (*Works* iii. 297). Bunyan found his full type of baptism, however, in the deluge. He says, "The Flood was a type of three things. First, of the enemies of the Church. Second, a type of the water-baptism under the New Testament. Third, of the last overthrow of the world." (*Ibid.*) Again, in his "Exposition of the First Ten Chapters of Genesis" he remarks "That was the time then that God had appointed to try his servant Noah by the waters of the flood; in which time he was so effectually crucified to the things of this world, that he was as if he was never more to enjoy the same. Wherefore Peter maketh mention of this estate of his; he tells us it was ever like unto *our baptism*; wherein *we* profess ourselves dead to the world and alive to God by Jesus Christ. 1 Peter iii. 21. (*Ibid.* 297). Again in his "Reason for my Practice" he says, "I

believe that Christ hath ordained but two (ordinances) in His Church, namely, water baptism and the Supper of the Lord . . . they being to us representations of the death and resurrection of Christ"—both of them, it will be observed, in his view, equally so. In his "Divine Problems" also, he puts the two ordinances on an equality of importance.

Two sacraments I do believe there be,
Baptism and the Supper of the Lord,
Both mysteries divine, which do to me
By God's appointment benefit afford.

"God never ordained significative ordinances," he declares, "such as baptism and the Lord's Supper . . . for the sake of water or of bread and wine; nor yet because He takes any delight that *we are dipped* in water or eat that bread; but they are ordained to minister to us, by the aptness of the elements through our sincere partaking of them, further knowledge of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, and of our death and resurrection by Him to newness of life. Wherefore he that eateth and believeth not, and he that is baptized and is not dead to sin and walketh not in newness of life, neither keepeth these observances nor pleaseth God" (Works iii. 297).

These quotations, I think, are sufficient to indicate the view Bunyan held on the *mode* of baptism: in his "Reasons for My Practice" he gives abundant evidence, too, of his belief in faith and regeneration as necessary precedents to it. The saint, he says, "is not made so by baptism; for he must be a visible saint before, else he ought not to be baptized." "That our denomination of believers" he asserts further "and of our receiving the doctrine of the Lord Jesus is not to be reckoned for our baptism is evident, because, *according to our notion of it*, they only that have before received the doctrine of the Gospel, and so show it us *by their profession of faith, they only ought to be baptized.*" "It is one thing," he sums up, "for him that administereth to baptize in the name of Jesus, another thing for him that is the subject, by that to be baptized into Jesus. Baptizing into Christ is rather the act of the faith of him that is baptized, than his going into water and coming out again." (Works i. 427, 446, 456-8).

Enough has been written, then, to show that Dr. Brown's suggestion that "on the question of baptism he had no very strong feeling any way," cannot be entertained. Bunyan undoubtedly held the denominational view on both the mode and subjects of baptism. His disagreement with some of his contemporary fellow believers was on the question whether baptism was requisite for admission to the Lord's Table. A great controversy on

this was raging among Baptists at the time that Bunyan became pastor of the church at Bedford, and it was inevitable that he should be proved on the one side or the other. The leaders for "close communion"—and they probably represented the views of the majority of English Baptists at that time—were William Kiffin, Henry Denne, Thomas Paul and Henry D'Anvers; while those prominent in advocating that the Lord's Table should be "open" to all Christians were Henry Jessey and John Bunyan—and in this advocacy they would represent the prevailing belief and practice on the question among the English Baptists of to-day. It was, says Armitage (p. 532) "a party quarrel amongst the English Baptists, and none but Baptists took part therein." One effect of that quarrel unfortunately was that Bunyan kept aloof from Baptist life. As Dr. Whitley remarks, we may be proud of him now, but he was not proud of the Baptists of his day, nor did his fellow-believers have any intercourse with him. Both he and they kept aloof and gained nothing from each other. (*A History of British Baptists*, p. 141).

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