

Robert Bowyer (1758-1834)

Artist, Publisher and Preacher

ROBERT BOWYER must be unique in the history of Baptists. As officially-appointed miniature painter to King George III he often moved freely in the world of the Court and the fashionable; yet throughout all his adult life he retained an active membership of Baptist churches. Indeed in his later years he served as pastor to a small cause he had helped to begin. Certain features of his public life have been traced,¹ but the need for a fuller outline with due attention to his religious activities seems long overdue.

Bowyer came originally from Portsmouth.² He had at least one brother, Amos, and two sisters, Susannah and another known later as Mrs. Leeks.³ Unfortunately the only sources for the beginnings of his career as an artist are family and personal reminiscences.⁴ The romantic version of these is that Bowyer was offered, whilst still a youth, an opportunity to migrate to America. His heart already belonged to one Mary Shoveller, also of Portsmouth, and Bowyer determined to offer her, as a keepsake, a self-portrait attempted with the aid of a looking-glass. A gentleman saw the result, pressed Bowyer to attempt the same for him, and Bowyer's career was launched. Rather than go to America, he went to seek his fame in London.⁵ The other more prosaic version was that Bowyer was already in London and began painting miniatures after observing some in a shop in Newgate Street.⁶ All that appears certain is that Bowyer came from an unpromising background, and unlike many other fashionable artists of the day, his success was due largely to his own initiative and the skilful use of his native gift.

Bowyer was a member of the Baptist Church at Meeting-House Alley, Portsmouth, whence he was dismissed to the Carter Lane Church, Southwark, on 10 March 1776.⁷ Mrs. Mary Bowyer (presumably the former Miss Shoveller) was also received at Carter Lane in the October of the following year,⁸ and the young couple set up home in Tower Street.⁹ Their pastor was the youthful John Rippon (1751-1836), destined to achieve fame not only as a distinguished pastor but as a hymnologist and editor of the *Baptist Annual Register* (1790-1802).¹⁰ Rippon and Bowyer became good friends, as will be shown, but Bowyer does not figure prominently in the records of the Carter Lane Church.

In order to underline the distinction Bowyer brought to contemporary Baptists, it is proposed first to trace his career as an artist and publisher before noting further details of his private and religious life.

Bowyer achieved considerable prominence as a portrait miniaturist. From about the middle of the eighteenth century the popularity and patronage of portrait miniature had greatly increased, and the number of miniaturists working at any one time comes to be reckoned in scores.¹¹ Bowyer was not destined to be one of the greatest, such as Crossway, Crosse or Smart,¹² but nevertheless was honoured and well-known by his contemporaries. He was supposed to have been a pupil of John Smart (1741-1811) who was reputed to be a pious member of the strict religious sect of Glassites, or Sandemanians,¹³ although one contemporary thought him vulgar, sensual, and greedy for money.¹⁴

The Royal Academy, founded by George III in 1768, sought to raise the status of painting, drawing, engraving, sculpture, and architecture by giving tuition to students and arranging an annual exhibition. Between 1783 and 1828 Bowyer had thirty-two portraits exhibited at the Royal Academy,¹⁵ and in 1782 one at the exhibition of the Free Society of Artists.¹⁶ This kind of recognition meant that when Meyer died, Bowyer was in 1789 appointed miniature painter to the King.¹⁷ The manner of these appointments is uncertain, and was not necessarily expressive of the King's own choice. "Bowyer! Who is Bowyer? He is no painter! I never heard of him," said the King on learning of his appointment.¹⁸ The King had preferred Richard Collins who in fact received much of his patronage. Bowyer did however make "an extraordinary miniature of George III, with a flat diamond over it half an inch square"¹⁹ and another portrait of him by Bowyer is reproduced as a plate for Hume's *History of England* which Bowyer published in 1797. Bowyer is also known to have painted portraits of George IV, and William IV.²⁰ There is another story told that towards the end of George III's life, when he was closely confined because of his insanity, Bowyer sat in the Royal Chapel at Windsor and took a likeness of the King on his thumbnail. Then as quickly as possible afterwards he made a sketch and took it to the Prince Regent. The latter was supposed to have been so affected that he could not allow it to be published (it was such a remarkable likeness), and told Bowyer to name his own price. One version says this was fifty guineas,²¹ but this in another place became one hundred and five pounds.²² The motives for the Regent's action are of course open to several interpretations.

Bowyer received much fashionable patronage. His portrait of Sir Edward Hughes "was described as a wonderful performance, and the Prince of Wales said it was one of the best miniatures he ever beheld."²³ By the Queen's desire, Dr. Francis Willis, physician for treatment of insanity who attended George III from 1788 to 1807, sat to Bowyer for the portrait which Fittler engraved in 1789.²⁴ Other subjects included the Dukes of Clarence and of York, Lord Sandwich, Earl Russell, Charles Fox the famous M.P., Lord Nelson, and four British Admirals.²⁵ Contemporary Dissenters painted by Bowyer included the Baptists John Rippon, Andrew Fuller, and

Samuel Pearce²⁶ as well as the eccentric Antinomian, William Huntington, 'S.S.' (= 'Sinner Saved').²⁷

Unfortunately few original portraits by Bowyer have been traced. There is a miniature portrait of Warren Hastings in the collection of the Duke of Buccleuch which is attributed to Bowyer.²⁸ There was also a miniature of Nelson, attributed to Bowyer on the grounds that it was a reduction of a full-scale portrait in oils by Bowyer, once in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle but not now there.²⁹ Modern experts are not as fulsome as Bowyer's contemporaries in their estimates of his work. G. C. Williamson in 1904 had found "three examples of his work at Christie's auction rooms which were catalogued as early works by Smart. They bear considerable resemblances, especially in the colour schemes, to the works of Smart, but are not nearly so well painted as regards the faces or hands. His work is looser and not so enamel-like as is the finest of Smart, and there is a yellowness in the faces which marks a striking divergence from his master."³⁰ Similarly, Basil S. Long in 1929 described a miniature of Sir John Webb signed "R B / 1786" which was a copy of a miniature painted by Smart in 1784 and concluded, "it is not particularly good, but imitates with partial success the manner of Smart. The initials are finely written, like Smart's."³¹ More recently, one of Long's successors at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Mr. Graham Reynolds, wrote that Bowyer "hardly seems in the two or three works known to be by him to have deserved his high contemporary reputation."³²

Deserved or not, of that "high contemporary reputation" there can be no doubt. His fame as an artist was supplemented by his labours as a publisher of lavishly illustrated works. The high quality of English engravings in the late eighteenth century encouraged the publication of ornately illustrated editions of major works. Boydell specialized in Shakespeare,³³ Thomas Macklin in the Poets and the Bible, whilst Bowyer turned his endeavours to historical pictures.³⁴ His first undertaking was an extensive and expensive task. In 1792 he issued a prospectus for a 'superbly embellished' edition of David Hume's *History of England* (first published in an unadorned edition, 1754-61). Bowyer had arranged with David Williams (1738-1816) to superintend the edition and write a continuation, but the latter's supposed Republican sympathies meant that the agreement had to be broken since the privilege of dedication to the Crown was likely to be withdrawn.³⁵ Accordingly in 1793 Bowyer issued, *An Elucidation of Mr. Bowyer's Plans for a magnificent edition of Hume's History of England with a Continuation by C. Gregory*. (In fact, no continuation was ever published.) The aim of the illustrations was defined as being "to rouse the passions, to fire the mind with emulation of heroic deeds, or to inspire it with detestation of criminal actions." Bowyer commissioned leading artists, including Henry Tresham, Robert Smirke, John Opie, P. J. De Louthembourg, and spared no expense in obtaining the finest engravings, many by Bartolozzi. By

1806 five parts in nine folio volumes had been published, and the paintings had been exhibited in Bowyer's 'Historic Gallery' housed in Shomberg House in Pall Mall.³⁶ Unfortunately a "series of unpropitious times and circumstances respecting the Fine Arts" (the country was at war) meant that the project was a financial failure and Bowyer suffered a severe loss.³⁷ Following the example of John Boydell, Bowyer applied to Parliament for permission to dispose of his valuable collection of paintings, drawings, and engravings by means of a lottery. This was granted on 11 April 1805 (45 Geo III c. xxiv), and the period extended in 1807 (47 Geo III c. i). Bowyer's own moral character was unimpeached,³⁸ but what his Baptist friends thought of the lottery is unknown. The scheme was that 22,000 tickets of three guineas each were offered, there were 1,451 "capital prizes" and "every adventurer" received "in warranted fine impressions of works . . . the full and intrinsic value of his stake of three guineas."³⁹ Perhaps these conditions eased any taint of gambling from the tender consciences of his fellow-Baptists. The lottery cannot have been a great success because the 'Historic Gallery' was sold by Coxe on 29 and 30 May 1807.⁴⁰

This was the same year that Wilberforce's campaign to abolish the Slave Trade reached a decisive moment: on 23 February the House had declared, by 283 votes to 16, that the Slave Trade was illegal. Despite his own set-back Bowyer immediately issued a prospectus for a new work, "intended to commemorate the final triumph of Humanity in the cause of the Natives of Africa,"⁴¹ *A Tribute of the Fine Arts, in Honour of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. Although no copy of this work has been located, it was evidently published in 1810, for on 16 February Bowyer wrote to George III and asked him to accept a copy: "The kind attentions which I have repeatedly been honored with from your Majesty, demand & will ever receive my most grateful & dutiful acknowledgments—Having just completed a most beautifully embellished Volume of Poems (which have been written expressly for the occasion) on the Abolition of the Slave trade, . . . I would most humbly flatter myself with the hope that your Majesty will deign to accept a Copy of this my new publication. . . ."⁴² This publication was presumably the basis of the description of Bowyer as a supporter of the Anti-Slavery movement.⁴³

Bowyer again built up his business as a dealer in prints and publisher of expensively illustrated volumes. There are several accounts from Bowyer to the Prince Regent, and in one of these is listed a set of small views to illustrate the Bible which were sold to the Prince Regent on 30 September 1812.⁴⁴ In 1816 he published, *An Illustrated Record of Important Events in the Annals of Europe, during the last Four Years; comprising a series of Views of the Principal Places, Battles, etc., etc., etc. Connected with those events; . . .* This was an unwieldy volume of thirty pages, adorned with large prints of foreign cities such as Moscow and Berlin. It was reprinted in 1817. In 1823 he published *An Impartial Historical*

Narrative of those Momentous Events which have taken place in this Country During the Period from the year 1816 to 1823. Illustrated with Engravings by the first artists. The illustrations reproduced in colour included the trial of Queen Caroline and the Coronation of George IV. Another work known to be published by Bowyer was *Fac-similes of Water Colour Drawings*, 1825. Not without reason did the *Gentleman's Magazine* in its obituary of Bowyer describe him as "the spirited publisher of the embellished History of England, which bears his name, and of various splendid popular works."⁴⁵

But Bowyer's *magnum opus*, the famous 'Bowyer's Bible,'⁴⁶ was never published though this was his intention. As early as 1791 (not 1802, as Earland suggested)⁴⁷ Bowyer had begun advertising his scheme. His pastor, John Rippon, active in writing to American friends in connection with his *Baptist Register*, enclosed brochures about the "Unique Cabinet Bible, by Mr. Bowyer" to Rev. Jedidiah Morse of Boston⁴⁸ and Rev. James Manning, President of Rhode Island College, Providence.⁴⁹ With the latter was enclosed a brochure for the President of the United States, which Bowyer hoped Manning, once a member of Congress, might deliver for him. Rippon commented, "Bowyer and Fittler are likely to get several Thousand Pounds by this publication."⁵⁰ Later, in August 1796, Rippon advertised the "curious and beautiful edition of the Bible by Bowyer" on the cover of Number xiii of his *Register*.⁵¹

What Bowyer set out to do was to produce the most fully and beautifully illustrated edition of the Bible ever seen. He sought to acquire all the engravings, etchings, and original drawings related in any way to the Bible that he could locate. Illustrations were obtained from many parts of Europe. Bowyer was evidently in Paris during the brief peace of 1802 and at some time obtained personal permission from Napoleon to engage in his collection of prints. The family treasured the following autograph letter:

"Let Mr. Boywer refer this matter to the French Consul, Mr. Otto, and if he sees no objection, let a passport be granted to Mr. Bowyer's agent.
Buonaparte."⁵²

But Bowyer kept adding to the Bible without actually publishing anything. After more than thirty years' work the 'Bowyer Bible' was an extraordinary and unique production. The text was taken from an 1800 edition of Macklin's Bible, which was then the most lavishly illustrated available. Bowyer printed his own title-page dated 1826 and by the addition of more than six thousand engravings expanded the Macklin Bible of seven volumes into no less than forty-five volumes. Illustrations of every subject in any way connected with the Scriptures were included: trees, plants, flowers, quadrupeds, birds, fish, insects, fossils, Scripture atlases, astronomical and architectural plates not to mention the illustrations of the narrative events. One hundred and thirteen original drawings by P. J. de Louthembourg at a cost of £1,158,⁵³ were included as 'vignette embellishments.' The work of more than six hundred engravers was included. The artists

represented range from 'Michael Angelo and Raffaele' to Reynolds and West: Rembrandt, Dürer, Titian, and Rubens were all included. Two people, for more than four years, were fully employed in mounting the engravings and ruling the edges.⁵⁴ The Bible almost defies description and statistics must suffice: the Old Testament filled 23 volumes with 2,315 engravings, the Apocrypha had 3 volumes and 959 engravings whilst the New Testament had 19 volumes and 3,019 engravings.⁵⁵ The whole set was housed in a magnificently ornate oak book-case measuring eight feet six inches square.

But such a mammoth Bible had long since passed beyond the possibility of being commercially published. Bowyer had compiled, at a cost estimated at about £4,000 this "last and greatest example of inserted Biblical illustration."⁵⁶ But his problem was, what was he to do with it? A scheme was proposed in 1829 whereby the Bible would be bought by public subscription and given to the Bodleian Library.⁵⁷ The printed prospectus, with the support of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Granville, Lord Eldon, the Duke of Newcastle, William Wilberforce and others commended the project to all sons of Oxford. Bowyer was prepared to sell the Bible for £2,500. He penned a letter to Dr. Bliss of the Library in which, with a certain lack of modesty, he wrote:

"... I flatter myself that my Rank as an Artist, & the splendid works which have issued from my Gallery during the last 40 years after an expenditure of more than three hundred thousand pounds in the advancement of the British Schools of painting & Engraving would be a perfect guarantee that this magnificent Bible is equal to every expectation that can be formed, & superior to any description that can be given of it:—I cannot therefore avoid presuming to anticipate that you will feel a gratification in uniting to fix the destiny of this inestimable work in the principal Library of the first University in Europe. . . ."⁵⁸

But despite such flatteries the Librarian was unimpressed, and as insufficient subscriptions were obtained the project failed.⁵⁹

After Bowyer's death, his cherished Bible suffered the ignominy in 1844 of being won in a lottery by a haberdasher.⁶⁰ This means of disposing of the Bible was devised by a certain Mrs. Parkes, whose exact relation to the Bowyers is uncertain.⁶¹ The subsequent history of the Bible was traced in a useful monograph by Archibald Sparke.⁶² It is now kept in the Central Library, Bolton, to which it was given in 1948, although it had been there on extended loan since 1917.⁶³

Thus in brief the public career of Bowyer has been reviewed. Considering the vast sum of £300,000 he claimed to have expended in the cause of British art he died on 4 June 1834,⁶⁴ aged seventy-six, a comparatively poor man. Although his will⁶⁵ spoke of giving all to his wife and £1,000 to 'my friend' Catherine Andras,⁶⁶ the probate granted was for only £1,000.

As to Bowyer's domestic and religious life, there are several points of interest. Robert and Mary Bowyer had one daughter, Harriet, who

unhappily died at the age of nineteen on 4 August 1796.⁶⁷ Or to be more precise, died happily: as a detailed account of her death, in the manner of the religious periodicals of the day, reveals. This harrowing detail was published by her 'dear Uncle and friend Dr. Rippon' in his *Baptist Register*,⁶⁸ and was in fact the substance of the funeral sermon preached by Rippon.⁶⁹ The interest of this account is two-fold for present purposes. First is the piety of the family as revealed in Harriet, a sweet and delicate young woman, pious and bravely resigned to her fatal illness. The second interest is the concern of Rippon to secure a 'dying testimony' from Harriet. Because of her sickness she had been removed to Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight, and on 19 July 1796 Rippon wrote her a 'pastoral' letter. After affectionately listing Scriptures and some verses of hymns, he proposed a series of questions:

"Do you *feel* that you are a sinner, a great sinner, in the sight of God? Is sin a trouble, a burden to your soul? And do you hate it, on account of its exceeding sinfulness? if so, write only the word 'yes,' on this line, for which I leave room.

"Do you clearly see your need of Christ to save you from the guilt of sin, and of the Holy Spirit to deliver you from the pollution of it? If so, write 'yes.' . . ."⁷⁰

Six questions were thus proposed, and all answered in the affirmative. They shed an interesting light on both Rippon's pronounced evangelical spirit and his pastoral methods.

Some time after this the Bowyers befriended a young woman of about the same age as Harriet who came from Bristol in order to have some wax models engraved by Bowyer. Catherine Andras was adopted as a daughter. She became wax modeller to Queen Charlotte and supplied the wax effigy of Nelson which was used at his funeral and is now in Westminster Abbey.⁷¹ Later the Bowyers also adopted another girl, niece to Mrs. Bowyer,⁷² this was most probably the Mary Shoveller who was received into the Carter Lane Church on 3 May 1812 and whose address was 'Brother Bowyer's Byfleet.'⁷³ Bowyer had moved to Byfleet in Surrey in about 1802.⁷⁴

John Opie, who after his second marriage became more intimate with the Bowyers painted portraits of Robert Bowyer, Mary Bowyer, and Catherine Andras.⁷⁵ To judge from this portrait Robert Bowyer was dark-haired with bushy eye-brows, wore no wig, and had a brooding, penetrating look. His wife appears as sweet-faced and pleasant, and is nursing a small dog.

A further indication of Bowyer's earnestness in religion is found in the *Baptist Register's* article entitled, 'The Happy End of Mrs. Leeks, in her thirty-second year: And a Letter, which was the Instrument of her Conversion.'⁷⁶ This letter was written by Bowyer to his sister.⁷⁷ Whilst in health, Mrs. Leeks had preferred the company of 'the gay and dissipated' to that of her 'professing relatives.' Stricken with 'an internal cancerous complaint,' she was moved to a home near London where Bowyer called to see her.

During the conversation she told him that "She did not recollect that she had done any body any harm, and therefore she hoped she should do very well when she came to die." To any devout evangelical, this was like a red rag to a bull. Bowyer returned home and wrote a long letter, kindly and affectionate, but nonetheless a serious and firm call to repentance. He began by frankly admitting to her that she was dying and this added urgency and necessity upon him to write. He insisted that her hope for eternity could not be "more false", and suggested she should "take a survey of your past life, and see how things have stood between God and your soul." She had given no thought to God, had not kept the Sabbaths holy, had taken His name in vain; what was to be the End? "Why, if these sins are not repented of and forgiven while you live, you must be shut up in Hell with devils and damned spirits for ever: don't my dear sister, think that I am harsh, and want to alarm you more than is necessary: I felt a wish to speak it in milder terms; but God who knows what I am writing at this moment, and my own conscience, forbid me to palliate with you. . . ." Bowyer movingly added, "You are now on a death-bed, a very little while, and *certainly* the last day—the last hour—the last moment will arrive—." Then he proceeded warmly and simply to invite her to place her faith in Christ. This would cause the angels to rejoice, and also "your dear niece, who is now in glory, will rejoice. I think she would address her glorious companions in such language as this—'Oh, blessed, blessed be God! My poor, dear aunt, who has all her life been totally regardless of her soul, in having set at nought the kind invitations of salvation, has this day become a sincere penitent;' and if anything could add to your dear niece's felicity, it would be, if she could add—'And the instrument which the Lord has been pleased to make use of on this happy occasion, has been a letter which my dear father has written to my aunt, respecting her soul.'" The letter concluded by Bowyer representing Jesus as saying, "*I came into the world to save sinners, even the very chief of sinners; don't let the magnitude of your crimes prevent you; it is not even yet too late; come to me, and be happy for ever.*"

Bowyer's appeal had the desired effect, and at considerable length another death-bed repentance was proclaimed through the *Register*. What is significant for our understanding of Bowyer is that he was obviously one of those moderate Calvinists—like Andrew Fuller and his own pastor—who directed appeals to the consciences of their hearers. His own honesty in writing had happy results. Rippon in fact also published 'The Happy End' as a separate pamphlet, describing it as "A Present for an afflicted Friend, not likely to recover."⁷⁸

Bowyer was a supporter of the Baptist Missionary Society. His name appears among the first published subscribers' list (1798-99), and he gave one guinea each year until his death.⁷⁹ When the first parts of Carey's translation of the Bible into Bengalee arrived in England, in about 1802, Bowyer was requested by the B.M.S. Committee to present a copy to King George III. Proceeding to Windsor, Bowyer

wrote a long letter of 'three pages of Post Paper closely written'⁸⁰ which detailed the origin and progress of the Mission. This was read by the King 'with the most minute attention,' who, after receiving the book said, "You will be good enough to inform the Gentlemen of the Baptist Mission, that I receive the Book with great pleasure, and return them my best thanks, wishing them every possible success." This story was often repeated by Baptists as an indication of the monarch's piety and his sympathy with their work.⁸¹

Bowyer was on friendly terms with some of the Mission leaders. William Ward took to India, at the request of Bowyer, a quantity of prints for a firm in Calcutta.⁸² Andrew Fuller, the secretary of the B.M.S., sat to Bowyer for a portrait. Either this original, or a print from the engraving, was given to Mrs. Fuller, who at her husband's request sent it to the Serampore missionaries.⁸³ But Bowyer's closest friend among the B.M.S. leaders was evidently the 'seraphic' Samuel Pearce, minister at Birmingham and devoted worker for the Mission. There are extracts of five letters from Pearce to Bowyer in Fuller's memoir for Pearce.⁸⁴ These suggest a warm friendship, for Pearce could write, "not a day has hurried by, since I parted with my dear friends in Pall Mall, but they have been in my affectionate remembrance."⁸⁵ Pearce wrote to his wife from Portsmouth on 29 January 1798, "I am most kindly entertained here by Mr. and Mrs. Shoveller . . . They have attended *seven* children to the gloomy tomb. . . ."⁸⁶ These hosts were presumably Mrs. Mary Bowyer's parents.⁸⁷ Bowyer sent to Pearce a print of C. F. Schwartz (1724-98), the famous missionary to Malabar. Pearce thanked Bowyer for the likeness of of a "man whom I have long been in the habit of loving and revering," and added that "the friendship it was intended to express, add to its worth."⁸⁸

But Bowyer was a member of the Carter Lane Church in Southwark. His activities led him far afield, and his prestige presumably brought a certain lustre to a congregation which did however include a number of prosperous merchants, such as William Burls, treasurer of the Church and active in denominational affairs.⁸⁹ How was Bowyer regarded in the Church? Were they suspicious of his dealings with the nobility? Or were they proud of his social position—which included the employment of a footman—⁹⁰ and did this bring him special consideration? Little is known, but one instance suggests that Rippon at least was anxious not to offend Bowyer in any way, and to retain him in the membership of his Church.

The background of the incident must be briefly sketched. Following a few incidents of church members taking it upon themselves to preach in other churches without due recognition by Carter Lane of their preaching gifts, Rippon in 1788 had led the Church to agree to very strict rules about this matter.⁹¹ These laid down correct procedure for calling members as 'public teachers,' including no preaching prior to the Church's approval, and warned that failure to comply with these rules would lead to exclusion from the fellowship. The

rules were strictly observed, and two members were excluded in 1800 and 1801 for irregular preaching.⁹²

But Bowyer, after his removal to Byfleet, had begun preaching to some of his neighbours. When he learnt that some members were displeased with this, Bowyer wrote a most illuminating letter to Rippon, which because of its interest is here given in full.⁹³

“Byfleet Cobham Surry

6 Jany 1810

My dear Sir

Understanding that it is your opinion as well as that of several members of the Church that I ought not in a *public* manner to have addressed my poor neighbours in a way which is usually denominated preaching, without having first submitted my pretensions to this important office to the judgment of the Church, that they might have determined whether or not my abilities were sufficient for such an honourable and distinguished employment: — I must request my dear Sir that you will have the goodness at the next Church meeting to communicate to the Church the following statement.

That when I commenced these exercises I was really not conscious that I was acting in any way at variance with the orders & regulations of your Church, of which I am a member— If I had, I should probably have requested that my name might be withdrawn from its Books, because I do conceive such regulations (however beneficial its effects may be) not exactly accordant to the Word of God— but it is perfectly unnecessary here to enter at all into that question.— With regard to the Church & myself, tho’ I am obliged to say that I think you have been rather remiss in not calling me to account before; if I have been acting in opposition to its laws; yet I cannot but feel pain in mentioning this, because my vanity will not let me account for the remission in any other way than supposing it must proceed from *personal regard* & for which I cannot but sincerely love you— at the same time for the honor of the Church I cannot consent that any personal respect you may feel for me, shall cause either you to bestow or me to accept any indulgence which wd not be granted to any other member.—

I have now been engaged between 4 & 5 years in speaking on a Sabbath day to my poor Neighbours & I am not without hope that the Lord has been pleased to own my labours— at any rate I am meeting with such encouragement to pursue my exertions that I do hope & trust if the Lord is pleased to enable me, that I shall never cease to promulgate his Gospel but with the termination of my life— now my dear Sir, let me appeal to you & my dear Brethren & Sisters of the Church— what would be the consequences if I was to comply with your present wishes— I should stand up there to address you from a text of scripture & for what purpose?— that you may determine whether I have proper gifts for speaking in a public manner to my fellow sinners— Now by this very act I should of course not only acknowledge that you had a right to decide that I was not qualified, but that I ought to be bound by your decision— it would therefore

be impossible for me to comply with the wishes of the Church & presume a consistency of conduct.

It may perhaps be proper to notice that a very dear friend, a brother of the Church did mention the matter to me twice, & that my reply was, that I had no particular personal objection to speaking before the Church; but I most candidly acknowledge to you that I had not then digested the matter as I have since done— & that at that time neither its adoption or rejection appeared to me of any great importance;— but I am now fully persuaded that in complying with your wishes, not only the character of the Church but my own would be implicated— I therefore am convinced that the proper line of duty for myself is to request, (& the mode which will be most for the honor of the Church to adopt will be), that I may be permitted to withdraw my name from its Books, in making which request I have only to intreat my Dear Sir that you will believe that my affection for my dear Pastor, the Deacons, & every individual member of the Church has never to the present hour been in the least degree diminished, & that you & them will ever share not only in my most sincere regard but in my prayers at the throne of Grace that you may ever flourish as a Church of Christ of his own right hand planting & that when you are all seated around the Table at the marriage Supper of the Lamb you may there have to recognize

Your very affect Brother in Christ
R. Bowyer ”

This letter was a credit to Bowyer: he was courteous, intelligent, and did not seek preferential treatment. It further confirms his genuine evangelical spirit and concern to spread the Gospel. He was now a man in his fifties, and his theological and personal reasons for not submitting to the Church's estimate of his abilities are understandable. However, the fact that Bowyer claimed not to know about the rules is surprising: he was a member when they were introduced, thirteen men had already submitted to extensive 'trials,' whilst a further two had been excluded for irregularity.⁶⁴ Does this imply that Bowyer's activity in the life of the Church was minimal? Bowyer's conclusion that the only honourable procedure was to withdraw his name from the membership seems both honest and valid.

What was Rippon's reaction? The Churchbook contains no indication that the contents of Bowyer's letter were ever brought before the Church. Not until eighteen months later, on 27 July 1811 did Rippon raise the matter; and then with consummate tact, as follows:⁶⁵

“ Our Pastor reported, that he, the Deacons, and other Members of the Church, had, for a considerable time, noticed the laudable efforts of our Brother Robert Bowyer of Byfleet near Weybridge Surry, who at his own expence, had erected a place on his Estate, for the establishment of a Sunday School, and in which he had also been successfully instructing his neighbours in the way

of Salvation;

The report appearing to give satisfaction. He proceeded to

observe, That we have a standing rule which requires such persons who are inclined to the work of the Ministry to submit their gifts to the decision of the Church. But as our Brother Bowyer has been a Church Member upwards of Thirty Years, and is a person of acknowledged talents, by those who have heard him in his own house; and as his situation in life raises him above the influence of pecuniary considerations in the Ministerial work, he recommended it to the Church, in this extraordinary case to dispense with the standing rule; and without delay to encourage our Brother to go forward in the sacred work of the Ministry.

"It was then moved by an unanimous shew of hands of the Brethren & Sisters resolved

"That we cordially agree in the name of the great head of the Church to desire our Brother Robt Bowyer to preach the Gospel wherever God in his providence may call him to do it— humbly praying that the Lord may crown his endeavors with success.

"Our Pastor then informed the Church that he would cheerfully transmit to our Brother a Copy of the pleasing transactions of the Church in this important business."

Thus the spirit of the law rather than the letter prevailed and common-sense saved the day. But Bowyer was the only member, out of twenty who were called to the ministry during Rippon's pastorate, to be exempted a preaching 'trial.' It seems highly probable that his 'extraordinary case' was the direct result of his 'situation in life,' but the ethics of the procedure are questionable. It is a tribute to the respect in which Bowyer was held that Rippon's diplomatic approach was unanimously adopted. Bowyer's relations with the Carter Lane Church remained cordial. On 23 October 1815 Mr. and Mrs. Bowyer, with Sister Shoveller, were dismissed "to assist in forming a Church in the neighbourhood of Byfleet Surry."⁹⁶ In an undated letter to Rippon, presumably from about this period, Bowyer forwarded details of four converts under his ministry who were coming up to Carter Lane for baptism, and noted that the new Church was to be styled, "The Church of Christ of the baptist denom meeting at the United Villages of Weybridge & Addlestone in the County of Surrey."⁹⁷ This Church was officially dated from 1815. From 1825 R. Grace was the pastor at Addlestone alone,⁹⁸ but Bowyer seems to have continued at Weybridge until near his death for his name appears in a list of churches and pastors published in 1831.⁹⁹

Bowyer does not seem to have received much recognition from his fellow-Baptists, his death was unrecorded in the *Baptist Magazine* although the *Gentleman's Magazine* noted it.¹⁰⁰ He does not seem to have entered very fully into the main stream of Baptist corporate life, but retained all his life Baptist convictions. His artistic and publishing work is known only to a few experts in those fields, even the remarkable 'Bowyer's Bible' is comparatively unknown. Often the history of Baptist churches is confined to the work of pastors; the story of Robert Bowyer is a reminder that many of those who spent

many years in the pew have a life worthy of recall from comparative oblivion.

NOTES

- ¹ Cf. *Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v.
- ² Carter Lane Churchbook, 10 March 1776.
- ³ J. Rippon (ed.), *Baptist Annual Register*, iv, 1802, p. 762.
- ⁴ i. A. Earland, *John Opie and his Circle*, 1911, incorporated family reminiscences 'taken down by Mrs. Asquith, from the reminiscences of Mrs. Stratton, Mrs. Bowyer's niece and adopted daughter, and used by kind permission of Miss Alice M. Westerdale, grand-daughter of Mrs. Stratton' (p. 71, note 2).
- ii. B.(enjamin) (B.(ensley), son of Thomas Bensley who printed many of Bowyer's works, wrote some recollections of Bowyer in *Notes and Queries*, v, 1852, pp. 350 f.
- ⁵ A. Earland, *op. cit.*, pp. 68 f.
- ⁶ *Notes and Queries*, v, 1852, p. 350.
- ⁷ Carter Lane Churchbook, 10 March 1776.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 5 October 1777.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ For Rippon, cf. *D.N.B.*, s.v., although this is quite inadequate.
- ¹¹ G. Reynolds, *English Portrait Miniatures*, 1952, p. vi.
- ¹² For a review of these and other artists of the period, cf. G. Reynolds, *op. cit.*
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- ¹⁴ *Memoirs of Thomas Jones* (Walpole Society, vol. 32), quoted by G. Reynolds, *op. cit.*, p. vii.
- ¹⁵ A. Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts. A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and their work from its foundation in 1769 to 1904*, 1905, i, s.v. 'Bowyer.'
- ¹⁶ A. Graves, *A Dictionary of Artists who have exhibited Works in the Principal London exhibitions from 1760 to 1893*, 1895, p. 32.
- ¹⁷ *Gentleman's Magazine*, lix, 1789, p. 281.
- ¹⁸ G. Reynolds, *op. cit.*, p. 173.
- ¹⁹ B. S. Long, *British Miniaturists*, 1929, p. 45.
- ²⁰ H. M. Hake, *Catalogue of Engraved British Portraits preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*, vi, 1925, p. 461.
- ²¹ A. Earland, *op. cit.*, p. 71.
- ²² *Notes and Queries*, v, 1852, p. 351.
- ²³ B. S. Long, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Cp. H. M. Hake, *op. cit.*, p. 461; A. Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts . . .*, s.v. 'Bowyer.'
- ²⁶ The print of Rippon was published by Bowyer in 1786, a copy was issued in J. Rippon, *A Selection of Hymns . . .*, 2nd ed., n.d., opp. title-page and in *Christian's Magazine*, i, 1790, opp. p. 435; H. Hake lists the print of Fuller as in the British Museum; and Pearce's portrait was published in *Baptist Register*, iii, 1798-1801, opp. title-page.
- ²⁷ H. Hake, *op. cit.*, p. 461. For Huntington (1745-1813), cf. *D.N.B.*, s.v.
- ²⁸ Information kindly supplied by Mr. J. H. Mayne, Deputy Keeper, Department of Paintings, Victoria & Albert Museum.
- ²⁹ Information supplied by Mr. Mayne and the Librarian, Windsor Castle (Mr. R. Mackworth-Young).
- ³⁰ G. C. Williamson, *The History of Portrait Miniatures*, i, 1904, p. 184.
- ³¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 45.
- ³² *Op. cit.*, p. 173.
- ³³ Cf. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, x, 1948, p. 83.

³⁴ T. S. R. Boase, 'Macklin and Bowyer,' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* xxvi, 1963, pp. 148-77.

³⁵ *Gentleman's Magazine*, lxxxvi, 1816, ii, p. 88. For Williams, founder of the Royal Literary Fund, cf. *D.N.B.*, s.v.

³⁶ H. B. Wheatley, *Round about Piccadilly and Pall Mall . . .*, 1870, p. 335.

³⁷ *Gentleman's Magazine*, lxxvi, 1806, p. 431.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Cp. T. S. R. Boase, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

⁴¹ *Gentleman's Magazine*, lxxvii, 1807, p. 655.

⁴² Royal Archives, Windsor Castle, Geo. 12946. (Extract supplied by the Librarian.)

⁴³ A. Earland, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

⁴⁴ Royal Archives, Windsor Castle, Geo. 26930.

⁴⁵ *Gentleman's Magazine*, n.s., ii, 1834, p. 221.

⁴⁶ Cf. A. Sparke, *The Bowyer Bible*, Bolton, 1920.

⁴⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 70.

⁴⁸ J. Rippon to J. Morse, London 30 June 1791: original ms. in possession of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. For Morse (1761-1826), a leading Congregational minister, cf. *Dictionary of American Biography*, xiii, New York, 1934, pp. 245-47.

⁴⁹ J. Rippon to J. Manning, London 28 June 1791: original ms. in Brown University, Providence, R.I. For Manning (1738-91), cf. R. A. Guild, *Life, Times, and Correspondence of James Manning . . .*, 1864; *Dictionary of American Biography*, xii, 1834, pp. 249-51.

⁵⁰ James Fittler (1758-1835), marine engraver to George III, engraved much of Bowyer's work. Cf. *D.N.B.*, s.v.

⁵¹ The original cover is preserved in the Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford.

⁵² A. Earland, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

⁵³ Proposed Accession to the Bodleian Library, in the Bodleian Library.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ A. Sparke, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁵⁶ T. S. R. Boase, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

⁵⁷ Prospectus in the Bodleian Library.

⁵⁸ Ms. letter bound up with the prospectus.

⁵⁹ Ms. note added to the prospectus.

⁶⁰ A. Sparke, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁶¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 6f. Sparke supposed that an examination of Bowyer's will would clarify her position: but examination of this has shown that she was not mentioned in it.

⁶² *Op. cit.*, pp. 7-9.

⁶³ Information supplied by the Chief Librarian of the Central Library, Bolton (Mr. T. Ashworth).

⁶⁴ *Gentleman's Magazine*, n.s., ii, 1834, p. 221.

⁶⁵ In Somerset House, London. (Copy)

⁶⁶ For whom, c.f. *infra*.

⁶⁷ *Baptist Register*, iii, 1798-1801, p. 100.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-101.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁷¹ A. Earland, *op. cit.*, pp. 69 f.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁷³ Carter Lane Churchbook, 3 May 1812.

⁷⁴ A. Earland, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* The portraits are reproduced opp. pp. 68, 70, 78.

⁷⁶ *Op. cit.*, iv, 1802, pp. 753-63.

⁷⁷ Although only the initials are given in the body of the *Baptist Register*, Bowyer's name as author is given in the Index to the volume.

⁷⁸ Advertisement in T. Walker, *Second Appendix to Dr. Rippon's Selection of Tunes, consisting chiefly of originals*, n.d.

⁷⁹ Baptist Missionary Society Periodical Accounts.

⁸⁰ *Baptist Magazine*, v, 1813, p. 217.

⁸¹ A. Fuller to W. Ward, Kettering, 31 December 1802, typescript copy in Angus Library (of original in the B.M.S. archives) described the event. Cp. *Baptist Magazine*, v, 1813, p. 217; R. Bowyer, *An Impartial Historical Narrative . . .*, 1823, p. 8; J. Ivimey, *History of the English Baptists*, iv, 1830, p. 106.

⁸² A. Fuller to W. Ward, London, 8 May 1802, typescript copy in the Angus Library.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ A. Fuller, *Memoirs of the late Rev. Samuel Pearce*, 1800, pp. 182, 186, 207, 235f.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁸⁷ In addition to the two Mary Shovellers already noted in this study, there was a Rev. John Shoveller, who was minister at various times both at Portsea and Newport, Isle of Wight, and who was named as an executor in Robert Bowyer's will. Clearly these were all related, but full details are not known.

⁸⁸ A. Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

⁸⁹ For Burls (1763-1837), cf. E. A. Payne, *The Excellent Mr. Burls*, 1943.

⁹⁰ Reference in a letter from Rippon to Manning (see note 49 *supra*).

⁹¹ These rules are given in S. J. Price, 'Brother Giles becomes a Recognized Minister,' *Baptist Quarterly*, v, 1930-31, pp. 37-41; H. Davies, *Worship and Theology in England, From Watts and Wesley to Maurice, 1690-1850*, 1961, pp. 137-39.

⁹² Carter Lane Churchbook, 17 November 1800 and 20 April 1801.

⁹³ British Museum Additional Mss, 25386, f. 116.

⁹⁴ Details from a study of the Carter Lane Churchbook.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27 July, 1811.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23 October 1815.

⁹⁷ British Museum Additional Mss, 25386, f. 65.

⁹⁸ W. T. Whitley, *Baptists of London*, 1928, p. 147.

⁹⁹ *Baptist Magazine*, xxiii, 1831, p. 591.

¹⁰⁰ *Gentleman's Magazine*, n.s., ii, 1834, p. 221.

K. R. MANLEY.

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