

## Church Life in Bunyan's Bedfordshire\*

CHURCH life in Bunyan's Bedfordshire, as in any other part of the country during his life-time (1628-1688), was marked by the excitement, strife and frequent change which affected every aspect of life in that revolutionary period. If we compare it with the century preceding it, the century of the Reformation, it would be usual, I suppose, to say that *ecclesiastically* the seventeenth-century revolution was less violent. I am not so sure.

During the hundred years following the death of Mary Tudor, the common man had risen steadily in self-consciousness, independence and power, till at last lords spiritual and temporal were all fallen before him. After 1558 the jurisdiction of the Pope was repudiated for the second and last time, but the Sovereign became Supreme Governor of the Church, and not only in name; and the Lords and the Bishops continued in a position of power in Church and State, in Parliament and outside it. By 1658 there was no sovereign: the King had been executed and monarchy abolished. Among those approving was William Dell, Master of Caius College, Cambridge, and Rector of Yelden, Bedfordshire, who in 1660 was charged with "allowing one Bunyan of Bedford, a tinker, to speak in his pulpit on the previous Christmas day" (which in 1659 fell on a Sunday). Charles I "was no king to him", Dell said; "Christ was his king; Venice and Holland [were] without kings, why not England?"—a perfect example of the inextricable intermesh of theology and politics which makes the period so fascinating. In 1658 not only monarchy was abolished, but episcopacy also, and the Archbishop of Canterbury was executed. Once more, a century earlier, it was revolutionary to put the liturgy of the Church into the vernacular; but the Prayer Book retained many of the older prayers, now transposed into Cranmer's marvellous English. In 1658 the Prayer Book too had been abandoned, and with it much of the ancient liturgical norm. The Westminster Assembly's Directory of Public Worship, which set a new tone, was never more than what it claimed to be, a *Directory*: it was not mandatory; opportunity now existed for the practice of extempore or free (or, as it was then called, conceived) prayer, the sort of prayer for which, earlier, ministers were often prosecuted in the church courts. And for the common man, most liberating of all, perhaps, was the abrogation of a law requiring him to worship in his own parish church and there only—together with growing evidence that in most religious concerns a large measure of freedom would be permitted, even encouraged: the authorities would no longer inter-

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fere. At last it was beginning to be realised that Christian faith and practice are essentially voluntary things, that persecution crosses their very nature. The liberties of the common man, the little man, and, with these, of the small society, the group of Christians gathering (or, as they preferred to say, gathered by the Lord) in quite small numbers, often initially of no more than ten or a dozen, were becoming securer.

It was still, however, a period of revolution—with the violence, expulsions and suffering, and with the sudden and bitter swings of sentiment and policy, which mark every revolution. In the 1640s clergy were ejected from their livings on a number of grounds: because of their politics, their churchmanship, their moral character; for royalist opinions, publishing, plotting; for the use of the Prayer Book, for administering the sacrament only to those communicants who would come to the altar-rails and kneel there; for failing to preach, or for inadequacy or incapacity; for drunkenness or sexual immorality. A. G. Matthews, in *Walker Revised* (1948), his revision of John Walker's *Sufferings of the Clergy*, finds 2,425 clergy ejected from livings in the counties of England. In 1662, with the restoration of the monarchy, the House of Lords, the Bishops and the Prayer Book, there was a fresh ejection of clergy: this time if they had not, and would not obtain, episcopal ordination, if they would not approve and use the Prayer Book without qualification or demur, and if they would not repudiate the Solemn League and Covenant with the Scots to which many of them had taken an oath. This time, in *Calamy Revised* (1934), his revision of Edmund Calamy's *Account*, A. G. Matthews finds 1,760 clergy ejected: fewer than on the previous occasion, but the grounds and conditions were different, and the penalties and sufferings were sharper. A time of troubles indeed, and of perplexity for the ordinary parishioners, who in some villages can hardly have known whether *they*—and not only their parsons—were coming or going.

But it is easy to get the picture out of focus. I believe the total number of livings in England was about 12,000. Of this figure the number of clergy ejected on either occasion is an appreciable, but not a very large, proportion. By far the greater number of parishes were not affected. Sentiment, loyalty and conviction have led to concentration (not unreasonably) on the sufferers on either side. However, those who continued peaceably in their livings throughout the revolution, and who were by no means all men of no principle, "Vicars of Bray", are now receiving careful attention. In time, with patience, we shall have a fuller, more balanced, picture.

Bedfordshire was then a single archdeaconry in the vast diocese of Lincoln, with the six deaneries of Bedford, Clopham, Dunstable, Eaton, Fleete and Shefford. Each of these deaneries was affected by the changes of the time; but from the roughly 125 livings in the county about 33 clergy were ejected by the Puritans, i.e. slightly more than a quarter, and only eight or ten at the Restoration, i.e. a tiny number proportionately. It is in keeping with this that in a list made in 1691 of places throughout the country with struggling Nonconformist

churches, mainly Presbyterian, in need of support from a fund newly established, no places in Bedfordshire are included at all. Does this mean that ecclesiastically the revolution passed over Bedfordshire, leaving the peace of the country parishes undisturbed? We might think so. But we should be wrong.

For throughout the country, and nowhere, perhaps, more than in Bedfordshire, small groups of earnest Christian laymen were also springing up, partially, or more often totally, outside the religious establishment altogether, even when this had been brought in line with Puritan positions in what is coming to be known as "Cromwell's Church". Sometimes these groups or congregations—conventicles as their enemies called them, churches as they did not hesitate to call themselves and one another—had the support of the clergyman in the parish or in a neighbouring parish. At the Restoration a few of the clergy ejected from livings were of the Congregational or Baptist judgment and way, about 140 out of the 1,760. William Dell, mentioned earlier, was one of these. Others in Bedfordshire were a relative of Dell's, John Donne, Rector of Pertenhall, who signed the covenant of the neighbouring church at Keysoe Brook End as its pastor; and perhaps William Wheeler, Rector, or maybe Curate, of Cranfield—there is some uncertainty about his position. John Gibbs, Vicar of Newport Pagnell, just across the Buckinghamshire border, is another who, with Dell, Donne and others, in 1653 signed a letter nominating representatives to Parliament for Bedfordshire. More often these churches gathered without clerical support and, at least to begin with, without any minister or pastor. They represent a long tradition of lay religion in England which goes back to the Lollard movement. This is what happened in Bedford, where in 1650, as the church book records, "twelve of the holy brethren and sisters began this holy work", four men and eight women (two of the women being the wives of two of the men). Two of the men were former mayors of Bedford, and thus men of standing and respect, but all four were laymen, including the one whom the rest chose "to be their pastor or Elder to minister to them the things of the Kingdom of Christ", John Gifford, an ex-royalist major who had no theological training and no episcopal or other ordination, but who had taken to preaching to them at first "in private, and afterwards", as the church book puts it, "in an open way before the world". Gifford, the record says, "was the main instrument under God, in gathering them into Gospell-fellowship", "holy Mr. Gifford", as Bunyan calls him, and he seems indeed to have been a remarkable man, leaving his mark on the church and on many other churches in Bedfordshire, in "the principles upon which they . . . entered into fellowship one with another, and upon which they did afterwards receive those that were added to their body and fellowship". These principles were "Faith in Christ; and Holiness of life, without respect to this or that circumstance, or opinion in outward and circumstantial things". This putting first things first, this insistence that "union with Christ is the foundation of all saints communion: and not any ordinances of

Christ, or any judgement or opinion about externalls” originated with Gifford. So much seems clear from his returning to it in moving words in a charge to the church just before his death in 1655. (He was then also Rector of St. John’s in Bedford.) It is a position to which Bunyan always adhered, and which he defended in print, in his piece entitled *Water Baptism No Bar To Communion*. Another church of this type was that gathered in 1655 at West End, Stevington, “to walke in the Commandments and Ordinances of the Lord”, as their church book records eighteen years later, “with their beloved brother and teacher, Stephen Hawthorne, their Overseer; . . . Gregory Reade of Steventon, an old Disciple gone home; Katherine Reade his wife, gone home also; John Reade, asleep in Jesus, he was a Teacher and was also appointed to breake bread to the Church as an Elder in the Cheife Brothers absence, and to baptize believers”; and others. The language is redolent of these untutored lay people’s earnestness. “Cheife Brother” is surely a delightful title; I have not met it elsewhere.

Because these churches were voluntary and voluntarist communities, subject to no jurisdiction and supported by no public funds, outside the Establishment and in every sense independent, they are often supposed to have been inward-looking and isolationist. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the first place, the churches recognised and supported one another in a genuine common life. In 1656, for instance, the Bedford church resolved and entered in their church book that “the members of the Church of Christ in and about Steventon may breake bread with us, and we with them, as the Lord shall give opportunity”. Two years later they agreed to a transfer of membership for “our sisters Elizabeth and Sarah Yorke . . . to Mr. Donnes Congregation”, a transfer which is also recorded at the receiving end in the Keysoe church book. The churches also met on occasion for mutual advice and encouragement. When, for instance, in 1658 the Bedford church had differences with the Keysoe, Cranfield and Newton Pagnell churches, “meetings of the friends of the severall adjacent Congregations” were called “to conferre of some things for the furthering of unity and love amongst us”. More than this, there was evidently some formal accepted agreement among them, which is now lost. In 1659 there is a reference in the Bedford church book to acting “according to the 8th proposall agreed on by the messengers of the churches”, and many years later “the antient agreement of the messengers which the associated churches hold [in] common” was read aloud in a meeting of the Stevington church.

In the second place, these churches were keenly missionary or evangelistic. Certainly, they took the responsibilities of church membership locally very seriously. This is well known. What seems less well recognised is their passion to share their Christian experience, to proclaim the gospel and to bear witness to their Lord more widely. Bunyan, who joined the Bedford church in 1653 and who soon became a trusted leader as deacon and preacher, till in 1671, after a long spell in prison, he was chosen to the “pastorall office or eldership” (as the church book puts it), says in his spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding*: “My

great desire in fulfilling my Ministry, was, to get into the darkest places in the Countrey [i.e. county], even amongst those people that were furthest off of profession [how old a vulgarism *off of* evidently is!]; . . . I found my spirit leaned most after awakening and converting work". And working in with this evangelism went the fact that the church itself was not limited to Bedford for its members but drew them from the neighbouring parishes, and then appointed visitors to care for them: in 1657, for instance, naming visitors for Elstow, for Kempston, for Wilshamstead and Houghton, and for Oakley, Stevington and Radwell. The influence of the church thus spread in concentric circles out to homes in outlying parishes, and then beyond these as Bunyan and others went out preaching. That Bedford drew members from Stevington may have led to difficulties with the church already existing there—such difficulties through overlapping did arise in other cases. But we do not know that it did so in this case. Stevington was, after all, "the Church in and about Steventon" and drew, just as Bedford did, from other parishes; some members came from Pavenham and the surrounding villages—Chellington, Felmersham, Radwell, Milton Ernest, Oakley and Turvey. In 1674 the church decided to meet in Pavenham once every three weeks, in alternation with Stevington and Oakley; and in 1693 members were baptised "in our new place at Pavenham" for the first time "since it was . . . fenced". I wonder if anything of this early open-air baptistery remains?

One effect of this combined fellowship and evangelism can be seen in 1672, when the persecution that followed the Restoration was lifted for a little by the royal Declaration of Indulgence, which permitted nonconformists to license themselves as teachers of congregations and their homes as places of worship. In Bedfordshire, people in as many as thirty-four villages were quick to register, and often several people in a single village. At Keysoe, for instance, where John Donne registered himself and his house, two other houses were licensed, at one of which three years earlier two "woodards", a dairyman, a labourer, a miller and a husbandman had been reported as preaching to "about 100" of the "meanest quality". At Cranfield William Wheeler had died; but in 1669 John Gibbs was reported preaching there, and in 1672 he licensed himself and his house at Newport Pagnell. At Stevington about fifty were meeting in 1669, and in 1672 Widow Reade, not yet "gone home", licensed her house, as did the church's minister, Stephen Hawthorne, his at Turvey. Radwell, Milton Ernest, Pavenham and Oakley also reappear in the records of these licences. Bunyan was licensed at Bedford, with the house of John Fenn, while other members of the church there licensed their houses at Elstow, Kempston and elsewhere.

The picture of a sturdy fellowship, continuing bravely through persecution, is unmistakable. And the leader in it all, not only as minister of the church in Bedford but as the one who "co-ordinated the applications for a number of [the] licences", is John Bunyan himself. On him, evidently, fell the care of all the churches; and, if his own sufferings and indomitable courage inspired them and held them together,

that is not surprising. In 1962, when the tercentenary of the beginnings of nonconformity was observed throughout the country, Professor Owen Chadwick of Cambridge pointed to Bunyan as the prototype. He reprinted a sharp exchange over the use of the Prayer Book between Bunyan and a justice of the peace at the examination which preceded Bunyan's imprisonment in 1660, an exchange which Bunyan concluded with the triumphant antithesis: "I said, the prayers in the Common Prayer-Book were such as was made by other men, and not by the motions of the Holy Ghost, within our hearts; and as I said, the apostle saith, he will pray with the Spirit, and with the understanding; not with the Spirit and the Common Prayer-Book"! Professor Chadwick then comments: "No concession by a restored Church could have satisfied this conscience. Either he must be given freedom, or he must be suppressed. It took the State a further quarter of a century to learn that he could not be suppressed and must therefore be given freedom". This is part of Bunyan's importance and of the church life in Bedfordshire led by him. The churches at Cranfield, Keysoe and Stevington, as well as in Bedford, all went on and all still exist—indeed, all have had their histories written by Mr. H. G. Tibbutt, to whose devoted and indefatigable work we owe so much.

Bunyan stands out, with his contemporaries Baxter, Cromwell and the Quaker George Fox, as a spiritual giant. He stands a little apart from the others. He was not a national figure like Baxter, to whom people wrote for advice from all over the country; he was not responsible for government, as Cromwell was; nor was he the father of a whole new spiritual movement, in the way Fox was. In Bedfordshire he is supreme, but he did not pass a great part of his time in London, as did each of the others. Yet, like Baxter's *Autobiography*, Cromwell's *Letters and Speeches* and Fox's *Journal*, *The Pilgrim's Progress* goes on being reprinted in edition after edition, the latest to appear being part of a scholarly reissuing of all his works by the Clarendon Press at Oxford under the general editorship of Professor Roger Sharrock, of King's College, London, who is a convert to Roman Catholicism. What would Bunyan make of that? *The Pilgrim's Progress* is also the only one of the four great Puritan books to be translated into language after language. This is a remarkable tribute to a book which, like Bunyan himself, is solely religious. Cromwell will always excite interest for his endeavour to work out religious ideals in a political context, but for that very reason we sense compromise and ambiguity. Baxter, for all his serious holiness and intense spirit, also wrestles with the claims of reason, which introduces complexity; and he is so eager to understand opposing factions that he can appear elusive. Fox is "purer" but suffers from what Carlyle calls his "enormous sacred self-confidence", as his *Journal* does from the limits set by his restless unbroken itineration. Bunyan alone takes simple faith and holiness and love and weaves them into a work of artistry and imagination, and a work in which the chief character is not himself, as in an autobiography, in letters or in a journal, but is Everyman. Have you ever thought of comparing *The*

*Pilgrim's Progress* with *The Divine Comedy*? Paradoxically, in the mediaeval work, where you would expect the sense of the Church to be all-pervading, Dante, while also Everyman, is himself and himself alone, and in a sense is also alone, in that, while he meets hosts of other people, he alone persists throughout the poem; whereas in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in the century when the individual comes to flower, one has much more the sense of company, of Christian with Faithful (still more of Christiana with Mercy and the children) and of their being *joined* by friends and companions along life's way. The reason is that, whereas Dante was both a solitary by temperament and a political exile by circumstance, Bunyan, whether in prison or out, was the leader and friend of these good Christian people in Bedfordshire. His artless account of his conversion in Bedford is prophetic of all that was to come: "in one of the streets of that town, I came where there was three or four poor women sitting at a door in the sun, and talking about the things of God; . . . they talked how God had visited their souls with his love in the Lord Jesus, and with what words and promises they had been refreshed, comforted, and supported . . . ; methought they spake as if joy did make them speak: . . . they were to me as if they had found a new world". It was not long before "I began to break my mind to those poor people in Bedford, and to tell them my condition; which, when they had heard, they told Mr. Gifford of me"; and the pilgrim's progress was begun!

For all his immortal genius, Bunyan is one with the people in these Bedfordshire churches and cannot be separated from them. Like the women sitting in the sun, they are mostly anonymous, or more precisely, since the records containing their names are still extant, their names are mostly no more than names. But in another sense we know more of them than of their contemporaries in other churches, whom they no doubt resembled; because Bunyan has put them into his book. It is common to think of the Puritans as heroic and hard. Heroic they often were, a Mr. Standfast, a Mr. Greatheart: they had to be. "He who will valiant be, let him come hither." And in Bunyan courage in facing the human persecutor is caught up into, or rather springs from, courage in facing the devil and all his angels. "Give up ourselves, lay down our arms, and yield to so horrid a tyrant as thou, we shall not; die upon the place we choose rather to do." And under persecution men do tend to grow hard, though they should not. But in the main they were men and women with the same anxieties and fears, the same weaknesses, as others, as ourselves; and in *The Pilgrim's Progress* Bunyan paints them to the life no less effectively than the characters of *Vanity Fair*, and shows withal a marvellous gentleness and tenderness towards them. Do you remember Mr. Despondency and his daughter Much-afraid? Or Mr. Feeble-mind? and Mr. Ready-to-halt? They are part of church life in Bunyan's Bedfordshire. Listen to Mr. Feeble-mind. "I am a man of no strength at all of body, nor yet of mind; but would if I could, though I can but crawl, spend my life in the pilgrim's way. When I came at the Gate that is at the head of the way, the Lord

of that place did entertain me freely, neither objected he against my weakly looks, nor against my feeble mind; but gave me such things that were necessary for my Journey, and bid me hope to the end. . . . Because the Hill Difficulty was judged too hard for me, I was carried up that by one of his servants. . . . They bid me be of good cheer, and said that it was the will of their Lord that comfort should be given to the feeble-minded, and so went on their own pace. . . . This I have resolved on, to wit, to run when I can go, to go when I cannot run, and to creep when I cannot go. As to the main, I thank him that loves me, I am fixed. My way is before me, my Mind is beyond the River that has no Bridge, though I am, as you see, but of a feeble Mind." And in the end "the Post sounded his Horn at his Chamber-door [and] came in and told him, saying, I am come to tell thee that thy Master hath need of thee"; and in a little "he entered the River as the rest. His last words were, hold out, Faith and Patience".

If we see here something of the church life Bunyan knew well, we see also why people chose him as their minister and leader, and why people have gone on reading him. Like his Master, he understands our weaknesses but loves us just the same; like his Master, he can see to the end of our feebleness and give us confidence that we shall come through. *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ* was the title he gave to one of his shorter and at one time popular pieces.

But, saith another, I am so heartless, so slow, and, as I think, so indifferent in my coming, that, to speak truth, I know not whether my kind of coming ought to be called a coming to Christ. . . . O my sloth and heartlessness, sayest thou! . . .

Poor coming soul, thou art like the man that would ride full gallop, whose horse will hardly trot. . . . But be of good comfort, Christ judgeth not according to the fierceness of outward motion, but according to the sincerity of the heart and inward parts. . . . Hadst thou seen those that came to the Lord Jesus in the days of his flesh, how slowly, how hobblingly, they came to him, by reason of their infirmities; and also how friendly, and kindly, and graciously, he received them, and gave them the desire of their hearts, thou wouldest not, as thou dost, make such objections against thyself, in thy coming to Jesus Christ.

Here we hear Bunyan preaching in the dark corners. And if this is how he preached, many must have felt, what Agnes Beaumont of Edworth wrote down, that "It was like death to me to bee kept from such a meeting". It was not very wise of Bunyan to take Agnes behind him on horseback, or very wise of her to go; it certainly got her into trouble. But after a priest had "staird his Eyes Out" at them, they got to the church meeting at Gamlingay, across the Cambridgeshire border; and what a meeting it was! "A blessed meeting to my soul indeed," she writes: "Oh, it was a feast of ffat things to me! My soul was filled with consolation, and I sat under his Shadow with great delight. . . . Oh, I had such a sight of Jesus Christ yt brake my heart to peeces". Agnes Beaumont may have been a trifle extravagant, not to say



hysterical; but tones and criteria vary: in 1801 her *Narrative* was reprinted under the title *Real Religion*. We should be the poorer without it, to put alongside the church book of Bunyan Meeting and of other churches and alongside *The Pilgrim's Progress* and others of Bunyan's books. Bedfordshire has been favoured. Church life in this period cannot be documented and recreated from such a fine variety of sources for any other county.

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*Nonconformity in Modern British Politics*. Stephen Koss. London: Batsford, 1975. Pp.263. £7.00.

The Professor of History at Columbia University has written a most informative book on the close and eventually tragic relationship between the Free Churches and the Liberal Party in this century. Whether the decline of nonconformist zeal caused the Liberal demise, or vice versa, or whether both were manifestations of a more complex process, may never finally be decided. But Koss demonstrates well the inherent contradiction between the idealism of the Free Church leaders and the realities of power, as seen by the Liberal politicians whose gratitude for nonconformist votes outweighed their ability (or willingness) to implement nonconformist demands.

Appropriately, Koss devotes most attention to the Edwardian period, which saw the 1902 education furore and the 1906 Liberal landslide. Even here the contradiction was evident, and the high hopes of 1906 were short-lived. The effect of the Great War, the rise and fall of Lloyd George, and the subsequent split in the Liberal and nonconformist ranks are well described. The account effectively ends with the "Council of Action" campaign of 1935 for peace and reconstruction; or was it in fact merely a device by the ageing Lloyd George to attempt a return to power?

The story, drawing from the contemporary religious press, diaries and letters, is extraordinarily detailed, sometimes providing an almost hour by hour account. But such a concentration on immediate events leads to some questionable judgments on wider issues, and hence on the significance of the events themselves. "Broadly speaking, there was no fundamental conflict between nonconformity, steeped in doctrines of egalitarianism, and socialism as it had distinctly evolved in the British context" (p.147). But nonconformist egalitarianism tended to be individualistic in emphasis, while that of active socialism, particularly as expressed in the growing trade union movement early this century, was increasingly collectivist. It could be argued that in this polarity lay the heart of the dilemma for nonconformity—and it is still a real issue for British society today.

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