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Brethren, another of the historic peace churches, which parallels the Mennonites in coming to a similar churchmanship from Lutheran pietism in the eighteenth century. Two chapters complete the collection: one analysing Augustus Strong as a Baptist theologian for the Mennonite Brethren - could there not have been a corresponding chapter, 'John Howard Yoder, a Mennonite theologian for Baptists'? James McClendon of Fuller ends with a thoughtful perspective on 'The Baptists and Mennonite Vision'.

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## BEDFORDSHIRE NONCONFORMIST DEVOTION

### Another Look at the Agnes Beaumont Story (1674)\*

'My dear Children, call to mind the former days . . . remember also your songs in the night . . . for there is treasure hid . . . Have you forgot the Close, the Milk-house, the Stable, the Barn, and the like, where God did visit your Soul?'<sup>1</sup>

These familiar words, part of the preface to *Grace Abounding*, offer Bunyan's apologia for publishing in 1666 his personal testimony to the grace of God. His appeal to recall specific locations where the believer has had an encounter with God was not lost on one member of his congregation, Agnes Beaumont, the subject of a recent article by Patricia L. Bell in the *Baptist Quarterly*.<sup>2</sup> The suggestion that we come to Bedfordshire for our Annual Meeting prompted me to look again at the familiar *Narrative* of her 'persecution', describing events when she had been a member of Bunyan's church for little over a year. Writing in her early twenties, this young believer recalls her 'songs in the night' and does so not only as a tribute to God's unfailing love but also as an honest reminder of her personal frailty and momentary failure:

And, the Lord knowest it, their was scarce A Corner in the house, or Barnes, or Cowhousen, or Stable, or Closes, vnder the hegges, or in the wood, but I was made to poure out my soul to god.<sup>3</sup>

It is a fascinating story, not the familiar testimony for Church Meeting with its account of 'the work of grace' in her soul,<sup>4</sup> nor one of the longer spiritual autobiographies of the period.<sup>5</sup> Her artless narrative, unpublished until the following century, was written primarily for her own benefit, vividly recalling not the compressed story of a lifetime but, almost in diary form, the events of one traumatic week in her early Christian experience. Patricia Bell's article carefully reconstructs the story, illuminating it with relevant genealogical, topographical and sociological detail, and it is unnecessary to repeat it fully here, but some brief recollection of the events might be helpful.

The year is 1674. The times were not easy. Charles II's short-lived Declaration

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\* The Baptist Historical Society's Annual Lecture, delivered at the meeting at Elstow, Bedfordshire, on 10 July 1993.

of Indulgence (1672) provided only a brief respite from earlier harassment and within a short time its more tolerant provisions for dissenters had been sharply withdrawn. Bunyan's earlier period in gaol had provided him with opportunities to write and organize the work of the local churches,<sup>6</sup> and there were some occasions when he was given sufficient liberty to preach not only in the Bedford area but even in London. But now, in 1674, further imprisonment was a threatening probability. At the time of our story it was a severe winter and travel was made more difficult by snow covering already poor roads. Agnes was given a lift on horseback to the meeting at Gamlingay by her initially reluctant minister. Her widowed father, who had at one time listened eagerly to Bunyan's preaching, was not a believer and, on hearing she had been carried by Bunyan, locked her out of their home at Edworth. Influenced by malicious gossip about the preacher's moral conduct, he insisted that his daughter could only return to the family home if she agreed never again to attend the dissenters' meetings.

Agnes pleaded with her father to let her in but, realizing that he was unmoved by her tears, decided to spend the cold night in the barn: 'soe I will, I will goe into the barne and spend this night in prayre . . . and it was a very darke night . . . And indeed it was a blessed night to mee; a Night to be remembered to my lifes End . . . It froze vehemently yt night, but I felt noe Cold.'<sup>7</sup>

Early the next morning she made several ingenious attempts to enter the house but each proved fruitless. Her angry father even refused to respond to her plea that she at least be given her Bible and her 'pattings' to protect her feet in the snow, vowing to disinherit her totally if she did not cut herself off completely from worship with her Nonconformist friends. As the day wore on he became increasingly enraged, drawing menacingly near to her, threatening to throw her into the pond. By now it was getting late: 'Soe I went my way down into one of my fathers closess to a wood side, sighing and groaneing to god as I went along . . . (and it was a very darke night), Where I powred out my soul with plenty of teares to thee Lord . . . these was harde things for me to meet with.'<sup>8</sup> Bunyan's earlier testimony had found an echo in her immediate experience: 'remember also your songs in the night . . . Have you forgot the Close . . . the barn . . . where God did visit your soul?'

She spent the Saturday night at her brother's home nearby and after Sunday worship renewed her efforts at reconciliation. She had thought the matter through and was willing to compromise. Perhaps her father would let her return home if she agreed to limit her attendance to Sabbath days only, but he demanded her complete withdrawal from the worship of the dissenters, at least during his lifetime: 'if not I should never haue A farthing . . . And he held out the key to mee. Said he, "I will never offer it to yow more, and I am resolved yow shall never come within my doore Againe while I live". And I stood Crying by him in the yard.'<sup>9</sup>

Agnes had cared for her father since the death of her mother many years earlier, and now, threatened by homelessness, poverty and the loss of his love, she yielded, accepted the key, crossed the threshold, immediately suffering remorse that, 'peeter like',<sup>10</sup> as she expressed it, she had put present comfort and future security before her commitment to Christ. Over the next two days it became impossible to hide her grief: 'Oh, now I must heare gods word noe more'.<sup>11</sup> Eventually, encouraged by her father's expressed concern, Agnes shared her acute sense of guilt. By now the

quick-tempered Mr Beaumont was more composed and said enough to indicate that he would not keep her from her meetings. On the Tuesday night she was roused suddenly from sleep to discover that her father was desperately ill, probably suffering from an acute heart attack. Now in extreme pain, *he* became the remorseful victim, distressed concerning his eternal destiny and, aided by his daughter, who prayed audibly with him for the first time, pleaded with God for mercy. Agnes ran through the snow to her brother's home but on their return her father had only minutes to live. Her sudden bereavement was quickly followed by further anguish. Knowing of the Beaumont household's temporary estrangement, and its circumstances, a scurrilous neighbour accused her of murdering her father, and the funeral arrangements had to be postponed, naturally giving rise to local gossip. Subsequently cleared of all blame by the local justices, she had later to cope with further accusations, that, after being cleared, she had privately admitted to the crime, that as they rode to Gamlingay, Bunyan had encouraged her to kill him and supplied the poison, and that he had wanted to marry her. Fully aware that this animosity had spread to the surrounding villages, she determined to go to Biggleswade Market so that various groups of gossiping people would as she walked 'through and through' observe her unharassed innocence: despite their 'whispering And poynting',<sup>12</sup> she exhibited a sturdy determination not to allow her Christian witness to be silenced by malicious opponents.

With her close attention to graphic detail, keen sense of drama, even the occasional shaft of humour, Agnes has considerable natural gift in relating a story; as G. B. Harrison said, she had little to learn from her pastor in that respect.<sup>13</sup> More importantly for our purposes, a narrative of this kind is valuable evidence for the theological convictions and the personal and corporate spirituality of dissenters in the persecution period.

In attempting to identify some of these central elements of Nonconformist devotion we begin with the narrative itself as a literary document. Nonconformist devotion was encouraged by written testimony. The careful recording of personal experience was an important aspect of Puritan spirituality.<sup>14</sup> It must have taken many hours for Agnes to write out her story, but she was no innovator as she did so; hundreds of others in these churches were encouraged to do the same. In the act of writing believers recalled their indebtedness to God; the element of thanksgiving was not to be minimized.<sup>15</sup> They were also encouraged to use their writings as a test of their own spiritual development,<sup>16</sup> as well as for the encouragement of their contemporaries.<sup>17</sup> Some writers prepared their manuscripts for the benefit of their children.<sup>18</sup> Accounts of this kind, highly valued as devotional literature, were eagerly read, carefully transcribed, and passed around, reaching a surprisingly wide reading public.<sup>19</sup> The reasons for writing were varied but the practice was constantly encouraged. When Ralph Thoresby, another young believer from this period, first left home for London, his father encouraged him to keep a record of daily events because the Christian is 'to be accountable to himself as well as to God, which we are too apt to forget.'<sup>20</sup> Writing became a commendable spiritual exercise.

The value of Agnes Beaumont's story is enhanced for us because it is the experience of an ordinary member of a Nonconformist church. It is not the considered judgement of a mature church leader but the reaction of a young convert.

From the wide range of Bunyan's writings we are reasonably sure how Agnes's minister might have responded to the series of events which took place in her life during that week, but her story is fascinating in that it shows us how influential his teaching had been in the life of a young church member. Where did she turn for her strength, peace and hope when suddenly assailed by domestic strife and local opposition? Was she unaided in her quest for help or did other Christians relieve her of that painful sense of solitariness which often makes unexpected adversity even more difficult to bear? These and other questions may help us to understand the life of these resourceful people at a time when many of them had to cope with family opposition, social antagonism and personal spiritual trials. Furthermore, this particular narrative is not a tale of untarnished heroism; it allows us to enter into the personal anguish of a believer who knows that, at one point at least, when put to the test, she had not stood as firmly as she or her pastor might have hoped.

Agnes Beaumont clearly benefited from Bunyan's teaching. Her narrative becomes an unpolished doctrinal confession as the victimized young woman recalls the great truths which shaped her theology of suffering. Its opening sentence focuses on four themes which figured prominently in the Puritan doctrine of the Christian life:

The Lord hath been pleased (the sovereignty of God) since I was awakened (the reality of grace), to Exercise me with many and great tryalls (the inevitability of suffering); but, blessed be his gracious name he hath caused all to worke together for good to my poore soul, and hath often given me cause to say it was good for me that I haue been afflicted (the relevance of Scripture in both Old and New Testaments).

As we trace the development of Agnes Beaumont's response to adversity, it is clear that these are the themes by which her Christian life has been nurtured, encouraged and sustained. They are dimensions of a living spiritual tradition which can be traced back through Puritanism to the sixteenth-century reformers. Prominent in the Bible itself, they owe their continuing appeal also to John Foxe's famous *Book of Martyrs*, Bunyan's constant companion in gaol. Those themes frequently emerge in Foxe's story, inspiring loyalty, heroism and hope. When Agnes was accused of murdering her father, her accuser said 'She must be burned' and, as she waited for the legal decision, she was haunted by the thought of it: 'Suppose god should suffer my enemies to prevaile, to take away my life . . . the thoughts of burneing would sometimes make my heart Ake at a great rate . . . and sometimes I should think of that Scripture that would so often run in my mind before my father dyed, "When thou goest throw the fier, I will be with thee" . . . At last I was made to believe that, if I did burn at A stake the Lord would give me his presence . . . But, think I, I must leaue it with god, who hath the hearts of all men in his hand.' The text she quotes from Isaiah was a comfort to Thomas Bilney the night before he died in the Lollard's pit at Norwich.<sup>21</sup> Agnes is unlikely to have seen anyone burnt at the stake in Edworth, but she knew the stories told by Foxe, vividly recalled by Bunyan, and may even have read them for herself. But note that the themes from the narratives opening have returned again to fortify her in a fresh trial: the sovereignty of God, the inevitability of suffering, and the comfort of Scripture.

These believers knew from the start that they would need all the spiritual resources possible if they were to cope with life in a hostile world, which brings me to the next point: Nonconformist devotion was expressed in courageous living. Stories of this kind provide us with wider perspectives about life within families and communities, enriching our understanding of the social context of Nonconformist witness. Other written accounts help us to see that the opposition that Agnes had from neighbours was not uncommon at this time. A similar narrative<sup>22</sup> from the border from the Edworth home and belonged to 'ye Church of Jesus Christ in Cambridgeshire'<sup>23</sup> of which Francis Holcroft<sup>24</sup> was minister. Mary Churchman also became an ardent admirer of her minister, 'that great man of God . . . my beloved pastor',<sup>25</sup> who, like Bunyan, suffered imprisonment. In her early teens Mary hated dissenters and, encouraged by local animosity, constantly harassed a neighbour, Mrs Marling, as every Lord's Day the woman walked to the Dissenters' Meeting: 'I really thought it my duty to set his great dog to molest her; and used sometimes to encourage him for half a mile together, with the most bitter invectives, such as saying, "My dog would smell the blood of a fanatic . . . ". The cur, though bad enough to others, yet, such was the preventing providence of God, never once fastened upon this gracious person; notwithstanding, for some time, I constantly made it my business to set him upon her.'<sup>26</sup>

Once converted, Mary also became the victim of family persecution. Her father was yet another uncontrolled man, a heavy drinker who constantly threatened to kill her for attending Holcroft's meetings: 'My father was then high constable, and had an order from the justices to return all the names of those who frequented the meetings. This made it a hard thing for his daughter to be a fanatic, which was what he could not bear. And this also increased my difficulty in getting out on the Lord's day, which, notwithstanding I sometimes did, and have walked eight, ten, yea twelve miles to a meeting. If my father at any time understood where I was gone, he spent the day in nothing but oaths and curses, and resolves to murder me. My mother, though an enemy to fanatics, would frequently send a servant to meet me before I could reach home, to tell me not to appear before my father was gone to bed; and I often hid myself in a wood-stack, where I have seen him pass by, with a naked knife in his hand, declaring he would kill me before he slept.'<sup>27</sup>

Mary suffered this fierce opposition at home for a year, wanting to become a church member but terrified that if she did, they might hear of it. Overcoming her natural anxiety, she asked to join the church: 'the Lord . . . enabled me to declare . . . what he had done for my soul, which I did on a Lord's day, as the manner then was.' Within a fortnight her parents heard how persuasively she had spoken at the Meldreth meeting and immediately she was driven from home, 'not suffering to carry any thing with me, except the clothes on my back.'<sup>28</sup>

Unlike Agnes, Mary Churchman's exclusion from the family home was not remotely temporary. The moving account of her return at her parents' request after seven years' enforced absence is further remarkable evidence of the bitter animosity of parents when their children became dissenters, and of the spiritual resourcefulness of a young woman who later had the joy of witnessing the conversion of her three brothers, and their admission to church-membership; also 'at the death of my dear sister, I had not only the comfort of seeing her conversion, but the great satisfaction

of seeing my dear father and mother also converted to the faith of Jesus, though at the eleventh hour.<sup>29</sup>

Such stories help us to see that, if those days were difficult for members, they were certainly so for ministers. Bunyan had not wanted to carry the young woman to Meeting because he knew how local tongues were wagging now that he was out of prison for a few months. Patricia Bell has reminded us that in a later edition of *Grace Abounding*, published after the Agnes Beaumont affair, Bunyan added some paragraphs defending himself from malicious accusations about his immoral conduct towards women. Far from having his '*Misses . . . Whores . . . Bastards, yea two wives at once, and the like*', he insists, 'I seldom so much as touch a Womans Hand, for I think these things are not so becoming me. When I have seen good men Salute those women that they have visited, or that have visited them, I have at times made my objection against it, and when they have answered, that it was but a piece of Civilitie, I have told them, it is not a comely sight; some indeed have urged the holy kiss, but then I have asked why they made baulks, why they did salute the most hansom, and let the ill-favoured go; thus, how laudable so ever such things have been in the Eyes of others, they have been unseemly in my sight.'<sup>30</sup>

Bunyan was far from alone in encountering local gossipers. Adam Martindale, a Cheshire Presbyterian minister, suffered considerably, unjustly accused of having a young girl severely whipped, causing her death. When a local Justice of the Peace, after hearing witnesses, was satisfied of his innocence, Martindale was cleared,<sup>31</sup> but these men were frequently the target of fierce verbal attacks from hostile neighbours.

Third, Nonconformist devotion was inspired by corporate worship. For many, it was far from easy to get to meetings and therefore they treasured every opportunity when they could do so. Such narratives enable us to appreciate the pattern and value of Nonconformist life and worship from perspectives other than those recorded in local church books, whose unadorned details are often little more than a factual account of decisions taken; they are fragmentary, sometimes uninspiring, offering little by way of reflective comment on the inspiration of worship when these devoted people met together. Impressions and experiences like those related by Agnes Beaumont fill out our picture of Nonconformist life and thought and remind us that, however valuable, church books do not tell us the whole story, and we must avoid the danger of imagining that, in those dark days, the main preoccupation of these people when they met together was to consider appropriate disciplinary action against offenders. For the day of the memorable meeting Agnes attended with Bunyan, for example, the Bedford Book simply records that at 'a meeting of the congregation held at Gamlingay . . . was received into fellowship with us our brother Scotchman, brother Sutton, Sister Cooper'.<sup>32</sup>

Doubtless encouraged that her church had been strengthened by the addition of three new members Agnes saw something more:

Oh, it was a feast of ffat things to me . . . and his fruit was pleasant to my tast when I was at the Lords table . . . A sence of my sinns, and of his dying love, made me love him . . . and I haue often thought of his grace and goodness to me, that Jesus Christ should soe gratically visit my poore soul that day. He knew what tryalls and temptations I had to meet with that night, And in A few dayes.<sup>33</sup>

Here is worship which is essentially Christocentric: it sees the Cross against the background of human sinfulness and need. It is worship which warms the heart and fortifies the will. It does not escape from life's adversities but enables the believer to face them heroically. Moreover, the worship is prepared for at home by specific prayer. Agnes asked that, despite her father's opposition, God would get her there and that, once among his people, she would be enriched:

And a while After there was to be A Church meeting At Gamgey. And About a weeke before, I was very much in prayre with god for two things, for which I set many houres Apart day and night.

And One was yt god would please to make way for my goeing, and make my ffather willing, who would sometimes by Against my goeing. And I found at last by Experience that the only way to prevaile with my ffather to let me goe to A meeting was to pray hard to god before hand to make him willing . . .

And the other thing that I was begging of the Lord for was that he would please to giue me his presence their at his Table, wch many times before had been A sweet seeling ordinance to my soul; And that I might have such a sight of my dying, bleeding Saviour yt might melt my heart, and enlarge it with love to him.

In those dayes I was Alwayes laying vp many A prayre in heaven Against I came to the Lords Table, where I often found a very plentifull return. I could say a greate deale more what I haue mett with, and how I haue beene in yt. Ordinance, But I shall for beare.<sup>34</sup>

What a tantalizing ending to her paragraph! If Agnes had written 'a great deale more', she would doubtless have said something to illustrate a further outstanding feature of their spirituality, their commitment to Scripture. When she grieved over her temporary disloyalty she was distressed that, no longer able to attend her Meeting, she might 'heare gods word noe more'. Nonconformist devotion was nurtured by biblical teaching. Several aspects of their love for the Bible are prominent in Agnes's story, and they are typical of her fellow-believers at this time.

We are impressed by their familiarity with its message. When, in that century, ordinary men and women took their first steps in literacy, the Bible frequently had a unique place in their early reading programme. A contemporary of Agnes Beaumont, Oliver Sansom, says: 'When I was about Six Years of Age, I was put to School to a Woman, to learn to Read, who . . . forwarded me so well, that in about four Months time, I could read a Chapter in the bible pretty readily'.<sup>35</sup> Oliver Heywood's wife, the daughter of a Puritan minister, 'could read the hardest chapter in the Bible when she was but foure years of age'.<sup>36</sup> Contemporary references of this kind remind us that when people like Agnes Beaumont began to attend a Nonconformist meeting they were not necessarily on unfamiliar ground when preachers like Bunyan quoted Scripture. Agnes's faith was inspired by the biblical message. Her own reading of the Bible, and Bunyan's extensive quotations from almost every part of it, made an indelible impression on her mind. Over sixty biblical verses are included in her story, almost equally divided between Old and New Testaments, and quoting from almost a third of the books of the Bible. Agnes knew it so well: 'one Scripture after another came into my minde to incourage me'.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, note their experience of its dynamism. It was not for them a word

which lay dormant on the pages of a neglected Bible, but was vibrant with power. In her trouble (and before it, as if anticipating her grief) Scripture takes hold of Agnes Beaumont. It is like a skilfully-directed arrow: 'That good word darted vpon my mind . . . still this Scripture would often dart in vpon my mind'.<sup>38</sup> During that bleak night in the barn, it came to her with supportive strength: 'that Scripture came wth mighty power vpon my heart'.<sup>39</sup> It made its way forcefully into her mind: 'the same Scripture would run throw and throw my heart'.<sup>40</sup> When, under the pressure of the moment, she accepted the alluring door-key, the Word exposed her frailty: 'And so soone as I got within the doore, that dreadful Scripture came vpon my mind, "They yt deny me before men, them will I deny before my father and ye Angells that are in heauen"; And yt word "he yt forsaketh not ffather and mother and all yt he hath, is not worthy of me" "Oh," thought I . . . What haue I done this night?'<sup>41</sup> Notice how arrestingly relevant are the references to 'father'. She had yielded to the pressure of an earthly father but she is accountable to a heavenly Father.

Once she is reconciled to her earthly father, the Word is pursuing her still, warning her, even anticipating her coming trial. Before her father was taken ill it spoke to her with penetrating power: 'Towards night that Scripture woud often run in my mind . . . them words runn through my mind'.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, notice their dependence on its promises. The Bible convicted them but it did something more. It reminded them of unfailing resources. Promises were particularly significant for Agnes. In the rhapsody of her testimony one can almost hear the preaching of her minister: 'Oh, it Canot bee Exprest with A tounge what sweetness their is in one promise of god when hee is pleased to Applye it to the soul by his spirit. It turnes sorrow into Ioy, feares into faith; it turnes weeping and mourneing into rejoyceing',<sup>43</sup> and again, '. . . before god brought that tryall vpon me, I had many Scriptures that would run in my mind to signifie I had something to meet with, and then it may be my heart would begin to sincke; But presently I should haue one promise to beare me vpp'.<sup>44</sup>

Her love for the promises of Scripture may well have come from her minister; they were certainly important for Bunyan. He possessed Vavasor Powell's *Concordance* in which 'Commands, Promises and Threatnings' were specially identified,<sup>45</sup> and we remember that it was a key called Promise which opened any lock in Doubting Castle, just as earlier the 'certain good and substantiall steps' through the Slough of Despond are identified in his margin as the reliable promises.<sup>46</sup> Again, when Bunyan bares his soul, like his young church member, it is to the biblical promises that he returns:

when I have been in my fits of agony of spirit, I have been strongly perswaded to leave off, and to seek the Lord no longer; but being made to understand, what great sinners the Lord had mercy upon; and how large his Promises were still to sinners; and that it was not the whole, but the sick, not the righteous but the sinner, not the full but the empty, that he extended his Grace and Mercy unto.<sup>47</sup>

Agnes proved that too, and heard for herself those unchanging promises. Here was a different key, given that she might open doors into new experiences of grace and goodness; in her uncertainty about the future, the promise of deliverance; in her

loneliness, the promise of comfort; in her remorse, the promise of forgiveness. As she stood by her father in his closing hour, she said, 'And if I stand by him he will dye in my Armes, And noe body neare mee. "Oh", I cried out, "Lord help me, what shall I doe?" Them words darted in vpon my mind, "Feare not, I am wth thee . . . I will vp hold thee".<sup>48</sup> As she ran for help, her fear of the dark night was natural enough but it was a promise which sustained her: 'I was suddenly surprised wth these thoughts, that there was rogues behind mee, that would kill mee. With that I hastily lookt behind mee, and those word[s] dropt vpon my mind, "ye Angels of thee Lord Incampeth round About them that feare him".'<sup>49</sup>

There is something more about their use of Scripture: it concerns their unhurried reflection on its great words. Meditation was an important aspect of their devotional life. They turned these majestic sentences over and over in their minds, and often lingered before one word with a sense of wonder. Agnes's minister did it and so did she. He knew what it was to fasten upon a particular word and from it construct a message of compelling beauty and comfort. As Henri Talon observed, Bunyan takes a word like 'Creator' and 'finds it so fraught with meaning, so radiant with power that, in a kind of ecstasy, he contemplates through it the unspeakable reality that it signifies'.<sup>50</sup> Talon here refers to *Seasonable Counsel* where Bunyan uses the words in I Peter 4.19 about 'the hands of a faithful Creator' to encourage the members of persecuted churches and says:

'a *Creator*', nothing can die under a *Creators* hands . . . The cause of God for which his People suffer, had been dead and buried a thousand years ago, had it not been in the hand of a *Creator* . . . Who could have thought, that the three Children could live in a fiery furnace, that *Daniel* could have been safe among the Lyons, that *Jonah* could have come home to his Countrey, when he was in the Whales belly, or that our Lord should have risen again from the dead: but what is impossible to a *Creator*?<sup>51</sup>

For all her youth, Agnes has taken a leaf from Bunyan's book. The Petrine warning of the inevitable trials, 'Think it not strange . . .', is an immense help to her, but she fastens on the tender word which Peter uses to introduce the saying, 'Beloved' and hears it afresh, as from the lips of Christ. That cold night when she was locked out she says:

as I was in prayre, that Scripture came wth mighty power vpon my heart, "Beloved, thincke it not strang Concerneing the fiery tryalls yt are to trye yow". Oh, this word "Beloved" made such Mellody in my heart, that I canot tell yow . . . that first word "Beloved" I thought sounded lowder in my heart than all the rest. It run very much in my mind all the night . . . to be ye Beloved of god, I thought that was my mercy, what ever I had to meet wth.<sup>52</sup>

Early the following morning she 'peeked through the Cracks of the barne door', watching her father enter the yard. She saw with dismay that 'he lockt the doore after him, and put the key in his pocket. Thought I, this looks very bad vpon mee . . . But that good word - "Beloved, thincke it not strange . . ." still sounded in my heart.'<sup>53</sup> She was without her Bible but she had committed that Scripture to memory, and in time of trouble it returned to her mind with persuasive appeal.

Their meditative reflection was not only on the words of Scripture but also on everyday things in the world around them; these too were used to remind them of eternal realities. It was a practice encouraged within the Puritan spiritual tradition and a preacher with an alert eye like Bunyan filled his sermons with illuminating pictures from the world around. Lewis Bayly's *Practice of Piety*, influential in Bunyan's earlier life, commends the practice. A bed reminds the weary of his final sleep, the act of rising from it anticipates the resurrection. The morning cock-crow recalls the denial of an over-confident disciple; the bright sunlight, the Sun of Righteousness with healing in his wings.<sup>54</sup> Through Bunyan, Agnes was influenced by this spiritual tradition which lifted her mind to higher things when she was locked out of her home. As her father refused to open the door, a greater dread invaded her sensitive mind:

Soe then I stood at his Chamber Window pleading and Intreating of him to let me in, beggin and crying. But all in vaine . . . he bid me begone from the window, or Else he would rise and sett me out of the yard. Soe then I stood a while at ye window silent, and that Consideration came into my mind, How if I should come at last when the doore is shutt and Jesus Christ should say to me, 'Depart from me I know yow not'.<sup>55</sup>

Instinctively, Agnes had thought of another closed door and there was a measure of peace. An earthly image had become a vehicle for a spiritual message. Similarly, as during that long night she was "bemoaning the loss of my fathers love . . . that good words darted vpon my mind, "The father himselfe loveth yow". "Oh, blessed be god", said I, "then that is enough".<sup>56</sup> Perhaps she had heard this also from Bunyan: 'Oh, how great a task is it for a poor soul . . . to say in Faith, but this one word, *Father*'.<sup>57</sup> Or, as he put it later: 'I myself have often found, that when I can say but this word *Father*, it doth me more good, than when I call him by any other Scripture Name'.<sup>58</sup> Agnes might lose her own father but another, and better, remained.

These people, then, experience an agonizing tension: they are caught between faith and family. Bunyan knew all about that. He need not have spent those years in prison, separated from his wife and children, feeling especially the pain of being away from his blind daughter: if only he would promise not to preach he could have had his liberty, and the comfort and security of home. Agnes knew the price he had paid, and she not only realized it from his example but, probably, also through his preaching: 'I tell you when a soul is brought to see its want of Christ aright, it will not be kept back, Father, Mother, Husband, Wife, Lands, Livings, nay, life and all shall go, rather then the soul will miss of Christ'.<sup>59</sup>

When Alice Clark asked to join the Bedford Church at the close of the century, she was given permission to make her confession and be admitted on the same evening, rather than wait for the next meeting as was customary. In Alice's case the delay could be dangerous because 'she feared she might be hindred her duty if her husband heard it'.<sup>60</sup>

In costly family deprivation, these people made the discovery which Baxter expressed in choice verse: 'He wants not Friends that hath thy Love',<sup>61</sup> and the theme continued to have a place in the hymnology of Nonconformist people in the following century: 'There my friends and kindred dwell'.<sup>62</sup> In the 'fellowship of

kindred minds',<sup>63</sup> Nonconformist devotion was enriched by supportive partnership.

The story has its own reminder of the fellowship of saints, and Agnes Beaumont wants us to know how special was their care and prayer. Mary Pruddon, for example, was a good friend. She and Agnes frequently shared conversations about spiritual things. Long before her father's sudden passing, Agnes had a vivid dream of an apple tree, 'full of fruited', which fell one night in a violent storm. She tried to lift it up and, unable to do so, ran to her brother's house for help. She had many dreams and believed 'some of them was of God'. After her father's death, Mary Pruddon reminded her of the one about the fallen tree. When words of Scripture kept returning to her mind, it was natural to talk them over with a like-minded friend: 'And I often said to Sister Pruddon, "I haue some heavy thing comeing vpon mee, but I know not what it will bee"'.<sup>64</sup>

Agnes' own brother was another counsellor. He warned her clearly enough of the dangers of disloyalty after her exclusion from the family home: 'Sister . . . yow are now brought vpon the Stage to Act for Christ and his wayes', and later that evening, as she returned to the farm, 'my Brother warned mee Againe that I did not Consent to promise my father to forsake the wayes of god . . . But I thought I could as soone part from my life'.<sup>65</sup>

There were those who helped practically like the anonymous 'maide that lived at hincksworth', who got her home from the meeting 'the wayes being so durty and deepe',<sup>66</sup> and others like 'Sister Everad' who welcomed Agnes to her Biggleswade home so that she might rest after her journey through the snow, and before she ventured forth into that bustling market where 'Almost all the Eyes of the market was fixt vpon me'.<sup>67</sup> That Biggleswade believer, with the gift of hospitality, could scarcely have dreamt that over three hundred years later, in the village where her pastor was born, her kindness would be recalled. She did what she could. And there were those who prayed. Not all are named. There was the 'good man in the Towne' who at the time of the serious accusation was staying at the Pruddon home. 'Soe they sent for him' and when Agnes's brother and wife told him of her endangered life, 'they 3 went vpp into An vpper roome, and spread it before the lord'.<sup>68</sup> Then, a few days later, 'the day the Coroner was to Come in the Afternoone, some of the Gamgy friends Came to mee, And they spent severall houres in prayr before the Crowner Came, that god would please to Appear graciously for mee'.<sup>69</sup>

Agnes had an outstanding pastor to help her, but he too was surrounded by others. The pilgrim's journey is not a solitary exercise: 'Now I saw in my Dream, that *Christian* went not forth alone',<sup>70</sup> and in Part II of the story he takes special notice of the helpers.

Agnes Beaumont's *Narrative* moves to an impressive conclusion. Though hardly by design, it looks both forward and inward and in so doing focuses on two essential aspects of Nonconformist devotion, a secure peace about future destiny and a necessary discontent about our present achievement. As Agnes describes her walk through Biggleswade market on that winter morning she says: 'And I see some Crye, and some laugh . . . their is a day A Comeing will clear all. That was a wonderfull Scripture to me, "He will bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy brightness shall be as the noone day"'.<sup>71</sup> Heaven was assured, and with it the righting of all wrong. But her final sentence conveys an appropriate note of

wistfulness. Reflecting on the trials she had so vividly described, she had the honesty to conclude: 'I wish I was as well in my soul As I was then'.<sup>72</sup> That surely is the note on which to end, with the longing to be better.

Of course, she would be dissatisfied with her present state; the race is unfinished and it will not do to look behind, either to better days or worse. Bunyan told her *that* often enough, for in that very period he was writing his *Heavenly Footman*. It reads like a sermon he must have preached to the Bedford believers, pressing home the need for continuance. But the wise pastor reminds his people that it does not finally depend on their own effort:

*come Soul let us not be weary, let us see what this Heaven is, let us even venture all for it . . . and when thou hast Run thy self down weary, then the Lord Jesus will take thee up and carry thee. . . . This is the way that Fathers take to encourage their Children, saying, run sweet Babe, till thou art weary, and then I will take thee up and carry thee He will gather his Lambs with his Arms . . . when they are weary, they shall ride'.<sup>73</sup>*

That is how people like Agnes Beaumont continued: they were carried.

#### NOTES

- 1 John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. Roger Sharrock, Oxford 1962, 'A Preface', 3.
- 2 'Agnes Beaumont of Edworth', *BQ* 35, 1, January 1993, pp.3-17; the material has also been published with illustrations and map in an attractive booklet (Belfrey Press, Bedford, 1992).
- 3 ed. G. B. Harrison, *The Narrative of the Persecution of Agnes Beaumont in 1674*, n.d. [hereafter *Narrative*], pp.6-7.
- 4 John Rogers, *Ohel or Beth-Shemesh, a Tabernacle for the Sun . . . An Idea of Church Discipline*, 1653, p.354; see also G. F. Nuttall, *Visible Saints*, Oxford 1957, pp.109-14, and J. H. Taylor, 'Some Seventeenth-Century Testimonies', in *Transactions of the Congregational Historical Society*, 16, 2, December 1949.
- 5 For these autobiographies with their predictable structure of unregenerate living, overwhelming guilt, liberating conversion and, often, subsequent call to ministry, see Paul Delany, *British Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century*, 1969, and Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience*, 1972.
- 6 Richard L. Greaves, 'The Organisational Response of Nonconformity to Repression and Indulgence: The Case of Bedfordshire', *Church History*, 44, 1975, pp.472-84.
- 7 *Narrative*, pp.21-3.
- 8 *ibid.*, pp.35-6.
- 9 *ibid.*, pp.40-1.
- 10 *ibid.*, p.38.
- 11 *ibid.*, p.44.
- 12 *ibid.*, p.89.
- 13 *ibid.*, xv.
- 14 William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*, 1957, pp.96-115; G. A. Starr, *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography*, Princeton, NJ, 1965; John Beadle, *The Journal or Diary of a Thankful Christian*, 1656.
- 15 Beadle maintained that the regular use of a journal 'will much prove us to thankfulness', reminding us that 'what is life but a continued deliverance'; *ibid.*, p.180.
- 16 ed., J. Horsfall Turner, *The Rev. Oliver Heywood, B.A. 1630-1702: his autobiography, anecdote and event books*, Brighouse 1882, I, 151: 'to compare my past and present state and observe my proficiency in christianity, to see whether I be better this year than the last, whether grace be stronger, corruptions weaker, my hart more soft, conscience more tender, wil more bowed, rectified, resolved, and my life more reformed'; cf., also, *Memoirs of the Life of Rev. Thomas Halyburton, Professor of Divinity at St Andrews*, 3rd edition, Edinburgh 1733, pp.7-8: 'But if I can recount the Lord's gracious Conduct toward me in a way of Conviction, Illumination, Conversion, Consolation, and Edification . . . and if ever it should fall into the Hands of any other Christian it might . . . be useful'.
- 17 *The Life and Death of Vavasor Powell*, 1671, p.19: 'These few things . . . I have set down . . . to keep a memorial of the Lord's benefits; and to stir up others, into whose ands these few notes may come, to have confidence in the power and goodness of God'.

- 18 ed., Walter Wood, *Memoirs of Walter Pringle*, Edinburgh 1847 (first edition 1723), p.1: 'Since God gave me children, it hath been much upon my mind to record, for their use, the wonderful goodness of God to me . . . to stir up and exhort my children to flee from the wrath which is coming upon a lost world, and to lay hold on the offered salvation'; similarly ed. W. Orme, *Remarkable Passages in the Life of William Kiffin*, 1823 - Kiffin says he wrote primarily to edify his children.
- 19 One of the two British Museum copies of Agnes Beaumont's manuscript was transcribed from a copy in a Hampshire home so it had travelled a considerable distance from Edworth within a few decades (*Narrative*, vii). When Samuel James edited his *Abstract of the Gracious Dealings of God with several eminent Christians* in 1760 his narrative of the Agnes Beaumont story was dependent on a manuscript 'transcribed by the Rev. William Coles of Ampthill; whose daughter, the widow of the Rev. Andrew Fuller of Kettering now has this transcript in her possession' (*ibid.*, 9th edition, by his son Isaac James, Bristol 1824).
- 20 ed. Joseph Hunter, *Diary of Ralph Thoresby*, 2 volumes, 1830, I, xv. Beadle was also concerned about 'the sin of forgetfulness', *Journal or Diary of a Thankful Christian*, p.2.
- 21 John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, 1641, II, p.277.
- 22 'Memoirs of Mrs Mary Churchman', in Samuel James, *An Abstract*, 9th edition, Bristol 1824, pp.93-102 (hereafter 'Memoirs').
- 23 'The number of ye names of ye disciples in ye Church of Jesus Christ in Cambridgehire': List of church members (1675) in Bodleian Rawlinson MS D.1480, 123; a photostat copy is kept at the Dr Williams's Library (R 1046).
- 24 For Holcroft see A. G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised*, Oxford 1934.
- 25 'Memoirs', pp.94, 98.
- 26 *ibid.*, p.93.
- 27 *ibid.*, pp.93-6.
- 28 *ibid.*, p.96.
- 29 *ibid.*, p.101.
- 30 *Grace Abounding*, paras. 309, 315.
- 31 ed. Richard Parkinson, *The Life of Adam Martindale*, Chetham Society Remains, Volume 4, 1845, pp.123-6.
- 32 ed. H. G. Tibbutt, *Minutes of the First Independent Church (now Bunyan Meeting) at Bedford 1656-1766*, Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, Volume 55, 1976, p.76.
- 33 *Narrative* pp.17-8.
- 34 *ibid.*, pp.10-12. For the Reformation doctrine of the sacraments as 'seals', see R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacraments*, Edinburgh 1953, pp.137-9.
- 35 Oliver Sansom, *An Account of many remarkable passages of the life of Oliver Sansom*, 1710, p.2.
- 36 J. Horsfall Turner, *Rev. Oliver Heywood, Autobiography*. . . , p.58.
- 37 *Narrative*, p.22.
- 38 *ibid.*, pp.25, 36.
- 39 *ibid.*, p.24.
- 40 *ibid.*, p.24.
- 41 *ibid.*, p.42.
- 42 *ibid.*, p.51; these expressions about biblical verses darting into the mind, and running through the mind, and the phrase 'that dreadful Scripture' occur in Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* (e.g. paras. 204, 230, 270).
- 43 *ibid.*, p.6.
- 44 *ibid.*, p.8.
- 45 V. P. [Vavasor Powell], *A New and Useful Concordance to the Holy Bible*, 1673.
- 46 John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (ed. Roger Sharrock) Oxford 1960, pp.118, 16.
- 47 John Bunyan, *I Will Pray with the Spirit in Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, Volume II, ed. Richard L. Greaves, Oxford 1976, pp.265-6.
- 48 *Narrative*, p.57.
- 49 *ibid.*, p.60.
- 50 Henri Talon, *John Bunyan, the Man and his Works*, 1951, p.118.
- 51 John Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, or Advice to Sufferers*, 1684, in *Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, Volume X, ed. Owen C. Watkins, Oxford 1988, pp.76-7.
- 52 *Narrative*, p.24.
- 53 *ibid.*, pp.25-6.
- 54 Lewis Bayly, *The Practice of Piety*, 1632, pp.238-44; for further reference to this aspect of Puritan devotion, see also John Downname's *Guide to Godliness*, pp.539-40; Thomas Gouge, *The Young Men's Guide*, 1672, p.28; William Spurstow, *The Spiritual Chymist, or Six Decads of Divine Meditations*, and Baxter's *Saints Everlasting Rest*.
- 55 *Narrative*, pp.20-1.
- 56 *ibid.*, p.25.
- 57 John Bunyan, *I will pray with the Spirit in Miscellaneous Works*, Volume II, p.252.
- 58 John Bunyan, *Come, and Welcome to Jesus Christ*, in *Miscellaneous Works*, Volume VIII, ed. Richard L. Greaves, Oxford 1979, p.247.
- 59 John Bunyan, *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded* in *Miscellaneous Works*, Volume II, ed. Richard L. Greaves, Oxford 1976, p.144; cf. also Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, para.325: 'if ever I would suffer rightly, I must first pass a sentence of death upon everything that can properly be called a thing of this life, even to reckon my Self, my Wife, my Children . . . and all, as dead to me'.
- 60 H. G. Tibbutt, *The Minutes of the First Independent Church (now Bunyan Meeting) at Bedford*, p.101.

- 61 Richard Baxter, *Poetical Fragments*, 1681, p.52. Baxter's poem, 'The Resolution', is headed 'Written when I was Silenced and cast out, &c'.
- 62 Isaac Watts, *Psalms of David*, 1719, the hymn, 'How pleased and blest was I' (Psalm 122).
- 63 John Fawcett's hymn, 'Blest be the tie that binds'.
- 64 *Narrative*, pp.8-9. For the early seventeenth-century background to the place of dreams in English radical religion, see Nigel Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed*, Oxford 1989, pp.73-103; as an example of their place in 'testimony' before Church Meeting, see the numerous references to dreams in John Rogers, *Ohel*, pp.397, 400, 413, 430-1, 435-7; and also for a contemporary exposition of the subject, Philip Goodwin, *The Mystery of Dreames Historically Discovered*, 1658.
- 65 *Narrative*, pp.38-9.
- 66 *ibid.*, p.19.
- 67 *ibid.*, pp.88-9.
- 68 *ibid.*, p.66.
- 69 *ibid.*, pp.73-4.
- 70 Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, p.98.
- 71 *Narrative*, p.89.
- 72 *ibid.*, p.90.
- 73 John Bunyan, *The Heavenly Footman in Miscellaneous Works*, Volume V, ed. Graham Midgley, Oxford 1986, pp.168-9.

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## BAPTISTS IN RUSSIA

### The Pashkov Papers at the University of Birmingham

Neither a trip to Russia nor expertise in the Russian language is necessarily needed to research the history of the Baptist church there, for the University of Birmingham's special collection (housed in the Heslop Room) includes the papers of Pashkov. Once a Colonel in the Russian Imperial Army, Pashkov was converted to Baptist beliefs in the 1880s and continued to support fellow Baptists in Russia: such was the fame of his faith that they were often called 'Pashkovites', throughout the many long years of exile in Britain.

Included within this collection, only a few items of which are in Russian, are not only Pashkov's personal papers, letters to famous Europeans, including F. W. Baedeker of travel guide fame, and the British Evangelical Alliance, but also his defence of fellow Russian Baptists. Pashkov wrote many pleas on behalf of imprisoned believers to Tsar Alexander III and sheltered persecuted Christians, including the Stundists, on his Russian country estate. This was managed in his absence by two Englishmen, Edward and Henry Hilton, who were later forcibly expelled from Russia for their trouble. Other documents relate to Russian Baptist principles of conscience, debates between Russian orthodox priests and Baptists in 1886, and general press cuttings on Pashkov's activities. Records of many different Baptist and Christian conferences held in Russia, South Russia and the Caucasus during the 1880s and 1890s also make up part of the collection. Correspondence with different Russian Christian groups, together with details of government and secret police action against them provides an insight into a time of Christian persecution in Imperial Russia, prior to the more famous communist regime's anti-Christian policies which have so recently and momentarily ended.

Anyone wishing to consult the Pashkov documents should write to Miss Christine Penney, Special Collections, The Heslop Room, University of Birmingham, B21 2TT. A handlist of the papers has been prepared.

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