

LIKE FLOWERS IN THE GARDEN

John Bunyan and his Concept of the Church

On 21 January 1672 the Bedford Independent Church, 'After much seeking God by prayer, and sober conference . . . did . . . with joynt consent (signified by solemne lifting up of their hands) call forth and appoint our brother John Bunyan to the pastorall office or eldership. And he accepting thereof gave up himself to serve Christ and his church in that charge, and received of the elders the right hand of fellowship'.¹ Presumably the elders visited Bedford jail to confirm him in office in that way, because what is not mentioned in the Church Minutes is that he was still incarcerated when that appointment was made. He had been arrested in November 1660 for holding a conventicle, and in January 1661 was sentenced initially to three months imprisonment, but his refusal to give an undertaking that he would refrain from preaching if released prolonged the term to twelve years. However, two months after Bunyan was elected pastor, Charles II issued his Declaration of Indulgence. Bunyan, among many other Nonconformists, was released and on 9 May was licensed 'to teach as a Congregational Person'. The Bedford church purchased a barn which was licensed as a Congregational meeting place, and a quieter and more visible corporate life was anticipated by all.

Bunyan the Christian was ever Bunyan the Churchman. In his earlier preaching ministry Bunyan did not set out solely to win converts but to make disciples who would find their place in the local church. In this respect he was reflecting his own experience in the early 1650s. In his spiritual pilgrimage he was ploughing a lonely furrow until he came across three or four Bedford women sitting in the sun, talking together 'about the things of God'. He tells us that 'they were to me as if they had found a new world, as if they were a people that dwelt alone, and were not to be reckoned among their neighbours'. They introduced him to the Bedford Independent Meeting, a small worshipping community, where at first he felt distinctly uncomfortable: 'the more I went amongst them, the more I did question my condition . . .'. He was observer rather than participant:

I saw as if they were set on the sunny side of some high mountain, there refreshing themselves with the pleasant beams of the sun, while I was shivering and shrinking in the cold . . . betwixt me and them I saw a wall that did compass about this mountain: now through this wall my soul did greatly desire to pass, concluding that if I could, I would go even into the very midst of them, and there also comfort myself with the heat of their sun.

Bunyan tried to find some passage through this wall, 'by which I might enter therein', but could find none. At last he found a narrow gap through which he tried to pass:

at last with great striving, methought I at first did get in my head, and after

that, by a sidling striving, my shoulders, and my whole body; then was I exceeding glad, and went and sat down in the midst of them, and so was comforted with the light and heat of their sun.²

There was no other way for Bunyan to be received as a member of the church than to give a public testimony of God's grace in his soul. Owen Watkins quotes James Packer:

For the Puritans true Christianity consisted in knowing, feeling and obeying the truth; and knowledge without obedience, feeling without acting, or feeling and acting without knowledge were all condemned as false religion and ruinous to men's souls.

Watkins says that 'The problems involved in integrating these three elements of personal religion lies behind much of the heart-searching and reflection recorded in spiritual autobiographies'.³

It was that integration that Bunyan was seeking, and to which he would be expected to give public testimony. Church attendance would help Bunyan towards that experience, but church communion would be denied to him until he gained it. Driven to his wit's end, he relates:

I began to break my mind to those poor people in Bedford and to tell them of my condition, which, when they had heard, they told Mr Gifford of me, who himself also took occasion to talk with me . . . he invited me to his house where I should hear him confer with others about the dealings of God with the soul; from all which I still received more conviction.

Even so, Bunyan found that 'lusts and corruptions would strongly put forth themselves within me'. These caused his desires for heaven and life to begin to fail, but when he thought he was further from conversion than before, he still had a Christian fellowship to turn to: '. . . I would tell my condition to the people of God, which, when they heard, they would pity me, and would tell me of the promises . . .'.⁴

In due course Bunyan found the assurance he was searching for, though he still admitted to being subject to fierce temptation. He applied to join the church, and was received as a member in 1654, and in due course was appointed a preacher. He was nominated for trial as a deacon but, 'being taken off by the preaching of the Gospel' and thus being 'otherwise employed', his nomination was withdrawn. After his release from prison he was to serve as its pastor until his death in 1688.⁵

In the church, liberty of conscience was allowed on everything except what were regarded as the fundamentals of the faith. The church practised open membership, leaving the mode of baptism to the individual conscience.

Bunyan agreed with his contemporary, Richard Baxter of Kidderminster, in seeing the church both as a totality of believers and as each local congregation. He went further than Baxter, however, in his conception of the autonomy of the local church. Baxter said that a church was only so when a pastor or elder or bishop was

joined to it by mutual consent. He thought the democratic processes among the sects to be dangerous, preferring the authority of a trained minister who must govern. Whereas for Baxter a repentant, trusting, godly person was a Christian, whether or not he or she joined a local church, Bunyan taught that the basis of church membership was individual salvation by grace through faith:

Man finds himself a sinner under the law. He cannot save himself in his fallen condition. Christ redeems man by his life, death and resurrection. Thus in the forgiveness of God and the new life in the Spirit, the church becomes a living reality.⁶

In his treatise on *A Holy Life* he writes: 'In the universal church there can be none but men who are holy', and in another sermon, 'Men are not created anew in the church, but first they are created in Christ Jesus and made meet to be partakers of the benefits and then planted in the church of God'.⁷

For Baxter the church remained a mixed community, though in the business of soul-saving; but for Bunyan the church was the fellowship of the already converted, the saints. Baxter trusted that the process begun at infant baptism would eventually lead to confirmation and discipleship, but Bunyan and his church saw the process beginning at conversion. For him this entailed sitting 'under the ministry of holy Mr Gifford, whose doctrine, by God's grace, was much for my stability . . .'.⁸

John Gifford, who founded the Bedford Congregation in 1650, was a converted Royalist officer. Gordon Wakefield notes his influence upon the young Bunyan, and that 'although he lived only until 1655 he determined the ethos of the congregation. . . Psalm-singing was a thing indifferent. Disagreements over baptism were to be tolerated. On these questions Bunyan followed in Gifford's steps . . .'.⁹ The Bedford Church Book begins with 'A Brief Account of the 1st Gathering of the Church of Christ at Bedford', written by Gifford:

the principle upon which they thus entered into fellowship one with another and upon which they did afterwards receive those that were added to their body and fellowship was faith in Christ and holiness of life, without respect to this or that circumstance or opinion in outward and circumstantial things. By which meanes grace and faith was encouraged: love and amity maintained: disputings and occasion to janglings and unprofitable questions avoyded, and many that were weake in the faith confirmed in the blessing of eternall life.¹⁰

Bunyan followed in this tradition of a certain freedom and tolerance, and yet a careful examination of prospective church members. Not only pastoral care but also church discipline was exercised, first, because some hypocrites (Bunyan called them 'fruitless professors') would inevitably infiltrate the congregation; secondly, with a view to restoring rather than excluding the genuine brother or sister who had been 'overtaken in a trespass'.¹¹ Believers had freedom to follow their conscience in matters that were not considered to be essentials for faith, in the terms of the

Bedford Church Book: 'baptisme, laying on of hands, anoynting with oyle, psalmes, or any externals'. Fellowship was indispensable: 'Christ's church is an hospital of sick, wounded and afflicted people, even as when he was in the world'.¹² As to church government, the entire congregation voted and the least and newest member could make his or her views known. But Christ was the head and prayer was the means of discerning his mind and will: 'He who is Lord of all, the Saviour, this is our governor, this is the Chief'.¹³

Those desiring membership of the Bedford church first made their request for admission to the minister or a church member. Information was presented to the congregation at a business meeting. Two or three were appointed to talk with the applicant. If satisfied, they were invited to come to the next church meeting and wait near the place assigned for the meeting, so that they could be called in. They were either put on probation or accepted immediately. If the former, they were required to give testimony to their Christian experience at the next church meeting. Finally, they were either accepted or rejected. One typical entry in the church book reads:

Our brother Maxye and his wife and brother Stratton and sister Susan Tyler were received into full communion with this congregation, they (as all others received) professing that they give up themselves to us by the will of God upon the account of our union with Christ, resolving in the strength of Christ to walk with the church, though they agree not in judgment in all outward things.¹⁴

G. Wakefield states that the Bedford congregation 'was not composed entirely of social inferiors, as its detractors supposed'. He quotes Christopher Hill as showing that, while 'in 1669 Bunyan's meeting was described as Anabaptist, having about thirty members of the "meanest sort" - shopkeepers and craftsmen, hatters, cobblers, heelmakers', there were several who were prominent in Bedford civil politics, two or three mayors and two Triers for the Cromwellian state church. All sorts and conditions of people went through the rigorous procedure of becoming church members.¹⁵

What was the significance of baptism and the Lord's Supper in the thought and practice of Bunyan and his church? As to Bunyan's own baptism, E. W. Bacon writes:

Tradition has it that Gifford baptized Bunyan one night by immersion in the river Ouse, and a place is pointed out where baptizing later took place. It is indeed possible, but there is no record of this happening. Only twice between 1650 and 1690 is baptism mentioned in the Church Book. Bunyan was influenced by Gifford his pastor, and later by William Dell, who would have abandoned baptism altogether.¹⁶

Although Bunyan favoured the Independents and was termed a Congregational teacher, he writes as if he is in the same fellowship as Baptists: 'I own Water-

Baptism to be God's ordinance', he says. In his controversy with some London Baptists, who were rigidly requiring believer's baptism for 'Church Communion', he refers to 'the Brethren which refuse to be baptized as you and I would have them', and puts it down to their 'want of Light'.¹⁷

In contrast to the stringent policy of closed membership and closed communion, Bunyan expressed himself for tolerance:

I dare not say, no matter whether water-baptism be practised or not . . . But it is not a stone in the foundation of a church . . . the saint is a saint before, and may walk with God and be faithful with the saints, and to his own light also, although he never be baptized . . . I am for communion with saints, because they are saints; show me the man that is a visible believer, and although he differ with me about baptism, the doors of the church stand open for him.

Again, he writes: 'I do not plead for a despising of baptism, but a bearing with our brother that cannot do it for want of light'. He goes further: 'He that believeth in Jesus Christ . . . he hath the heart, power and doctrine of Baptism . . . he wanteth only the outward shew . . . '.

We can understand Bunyan's lenient view on baptism as a requirement for church membership when we consider that most of his hearers would have been baptized in infancy, when parents would have had their names written in the parish church register. In any case, for the Bedford Meeting, personal faith and holiness of life were the *sine qua non* for church membership rather than the outward sign of water baptism. Bunyan accused his opponents of making baptism 'a bar to shut out the Godly and a Trap-door to let the unprepared in to the Lord's Supper'.¹⁸

Bunyan thus denies that baptism is an *initiating* ordinance. He and his church looked rather for the baptism of the Spirit in those who applied for membership. This is how he interpreted Ephesians 4.4 and 5 ('There is one body and one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism . . . ') and I Corinthians 12.13 ('For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . ').¹⁹

By the baptism of the Spirit he meant the evidence in the believer's life of the Spirit's sanctifying work in the soul. In his treatise, *A Reason for my Practice in Worship*, he asks why believers were baptized in New Testament times:

That their own faith might be strengthened in the death and resurrection of Christ, and that [they] themselves might see that they have professed themselves dead and buried, and risen with him to newness of life . . . Father, it confirmed to his own conscience the forgiveness of sins, if by unfeigned faith he laid hold upon Jesus Christ.²⁰

Bunyan allowed that 'Oft-times the Holy Ghost, in the comfortable influence of it, has accompanied the baptized in the very act of administering it'. This implies that he had assisted in baptizing new converts; clearly he had often witnessed believer's baptism, and believed that God, and not only the candidate and the one

administering it, had a part to play in the ordinance. But he insisted that baptism be separated from admission to church membership: 'I dare not have communion with those that profess not faith and holiness', he said, 'or with the openly profane' but he could communicate with visible saints who differed from him in judgment about water baptism. 'It is love, not baptism, that discovereth us to the world to be Christ's disciples'. He would not let 'water-baptism be the rule, the door, the bolt, the bar, the wall of division between the righteous and the righteous'.²¹ He reverently esteemed the two ordinances which Christ gave to the church, but he was concerned lest Christians made them more important than was first intended, because 'tis possible to commit Idolatry, even with God's own appointments'.²²

In the second part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Christiana and other pilgrims submit to a cleansing in the bath at Interpreter's house because they 'must orderly go from hence' on their pilgrimage. But later Mr Feeble-mind who is 'so weak a Man, as to be offended with that which others have a liberty to do', Mr Ready-to-halt, and others who had not gone through the bath were admitted to the company. When Great-heart welcomes Feeble-mind, he assures him that the rest of the group 'will deny ourselves of some things opinionative and practical, for your sake; we will not enter into doubtful disputations before you'. Arriving at the palace, 'the Feeble and the Weak went in, and Mr Great-heart, and the rest did follow'.²³ Clearly, for Bunyan and his church, believer's baptism was not essential for church membership, whereas faith and holiness of life were. The true believer already has the doctrine of baptism by virtue of faith, repentance and holiness of life. He only lacks the outward ceremony. John Colwell says that 'Bunyan's openness, for all its belittling of the importance of baptism, at least has the merit of being a genuine compromise, in which each individual believer is granted the freedom to follow his own conscience until such a time as the church as a whole reforms its practice'.²⁴ The point is that in Bunyan's day church membership was practically synonymous with church communion, and he argued that 'the Church of Christ hath not: Warrant to keep out of their Communion the Christian that is discovered to be a visible Saint of the Word, the Christian that walketh according to his Light with God'.²⁵

Whereas he did not hold strict views on baptism, Bunyan had no hesitation in extolling the necessity for, and the benefits of, the Communion Service. He said: 'The Lord's supper, not baptism is for the church as a church; therefore as we will maintain the church's edifying, that must be maintained in it, yea used oft, to shew the Lord's death till he come. 1 Cor. xi 22 - 26'. He personally found joy in 'that blessed ordinance of Christ in which the Lord did come down upon my conscience with the discovery of his death for my sins, and as I then felt, did as if he plunged me in the vertue of the same'. He relates that in a reaction to that elevating experience, he went 'for three quarters of the year' without rest or ease until he was able to affirm again the benefits of the Supper:

I have been usually very well and comfortable in the partaking of that blessed ordinance, and have I trust therein discerned the Lord's body as broken for

my sins, and that his precious blood had been shed for my transgressions.²⁶

Elsewhere he describes the Supper as 'a part of that worship which Christ hath instituted for his Church, to be conversant in as a church; presenting to them as such, with their Communion with their Head, and with one another as members of him'. He asks: 'Christ made himself known to them in breaking of bread; who would not then, that loves to know him, be present at such an ordinance? Lu xxiv.35'.²⁷ This suggests a *dynamic* rather than a mere memorialist view of the Communion Service. There was no controversy among sectaries of his day about the significance of the Lord's Supper. Bunyan had a high regard for this ordinance, but he recognized that the Supper could be taken insincerely:

God never ordained significative ordinances, such as Baptism, the Lord's Supper, or the like, for the sake of water, or of Bread and Wine; nor yet because he takes delight that we are dipped in Water or eat that Bread: but they were ordained to minister to us by the Aptness of the Elements, through our sincere partaking of them, further acknowledg of the death, burial and Resurrection of Christ, and of our death and resurrection by him to newness of life.²⁸

Communion, for him, introduced the believer to the inner heart of church fellowship where new converts and mature believers encouraged and nourished one another's faith and witness. Bunyan used the analogy of the church as a garden:

Christians are like flowers in the garden, that stand and grow where the gardener hath planted them . . . They have upon each of them the dew of heaven, which being shaken by the wind, they let fall their dew at each other's roots, whereby they are jointly nourished, and become nourishers of one another.²⁹

That seems a rather romantic view of the church, especially when we read of the pastoral care and discipline that were required to be exercised by the elders towards the members. The careful screening of applicants for membership did not prevent some weeds from growing up among the flowers, while some of the latter were badly shaken by the bitter winds of adversity and persecution. In respect of church discipline, John Brown suggests that Mr Badman, in Bunyan's story, may have been based upon the case of John Wildman who joined the Bedford Meeting in 1669 and was in constant trouble for lying and slandering. He was expelled in 1683, but was still trying to be re-admitted seventeen years later. Members were disciplined when found guilty of a failure to repay debts, of being drunk, of brawling with neighbours, of wife-beating and scandal-mongering. They were suspended from communion until they repented. Fellow members who had serious disagreements needed to be reconciled to one another. The Church Minutes for 7 March 1691, some three years after Bunyan's death, record that there had been 'sum discord for sum time between brother Suttun and brother Thomas Bunyan [John's son]. Two brethren war apoynted to goe to them and endeavour to make up the difference, but

if they could not, then to apoynt a day to come to Bedford, and also to desire the latter to forbear preaching till such time as the differance be made up'. After initial failure at 'reconsiliation' at a Church Meeting on 9 May, it was reported, no doubt with some relief, that 'the differance between brother Suttun and brother Thomas Bunyan was reconciled'.³⁰

Undoubtedly, the Bedford church was as concerned about purity and unity within the fellowship as it was with concord with all 'visible saints' outside its doors. For them, whilst salvation was personal it was never intended to be private. Reconciliation with God through Christ called not only for individual holy living, but also for right relationships within the body of believers.

Bunyan was undoubtedly a passionate evangelist, but his evangelism was closely bound up with local church membership, and all members were the object of pastoral care and discipline. It is surely simplistic to state, as does R. L. McCan, that, in the matter of church life and fellowship, Baxter was systematic while Bunyan was more spontaneous.³¹ Richard Greaves believes that Bunyan and his Nonconformist fellow-prisoners developed a plan which they were to put into effect on their release. After 1672 there was an ample supply of preachers and teachers provided for the outposts of the Bedford Meeting. This had a twofold effect on Bunyan's ministry: firstly, it provided a framework in which he conducted the bulk of his pastoral work; secondly, a group of teachers could carry on the work while he was away preaching the gospel.³²

'Church fellowship, rightly managed, is the glory of the world', said Bunyan in one of his later sermons.³³ Great care was taken that it be rightly managed lest it be the shame, not the glory, of the world. There clearly is system and organization involved in the management of the Bedford church and its satellite congregations. There again, Bunyan gives systematic instruction to church members as to their behaviour in relation to one another and to the world at large. He exhorts the Christian at home and at work and in respect of the State, even though government was largely hostile to Dissenters, to walk worthy of Christ. The believer must do good works towards his neighbour and in his community. Though he does not have to justify himself before God, since he has trusted in Christ for salvation, he must nevertheless justify himself before men by his good deeds:

I beseech you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ that you put yourselves into a conscientious performance [of good works] that you may, while you live here, be vessels of honour, and fit for the master's use, and prepared for every good work.³⁴

This concept of fellowship and community-living is present in both parts of *Pilgrim's Progress*, though it is more conspicuous in Part II than in Part I. B. R. White sees Christian as 'essentially a lonely figure'. He admits that he had counsellors such as Evangelist and Interpreter, and friends on the way like Faithful and Hopeful, 'but the sense of a surrounding presence of a church fellowship was almost entirely absent'. He explains this as partly due to the idea of personal

pilgrimage making the possibility of a community in pilgrimage difficult to handle. He says that this:

illustrates the deep cleft between the two cardinal aspects of both Calvinism itself and Puritan theology more generally, for they were both deeply concerned with the theology of individual faith and salvation, and also with the nature and constitution of the visible church.³⁵

Gordon Wakefield, however, insists that the Puritan way was never solitary. He sees the House Beautiful and the Shepherds on the Delectable Mountains as indicative of fellowship. There again, the Palace Beautiful clearly represents the benefits of church fellowship. When Christian was going on his way in an unhappy frame of mind, he suddenly saw 'a very stately Palace before him, the name whereof was *Beautiful* . . .'.³⁶

Two lions stood in the way, but the porter of the lodge, whose name is Watchful, 'bade him not to fear them for they are chained, and are placed there for trial of faith where it is, and for discovery of those that have none . . .'. Christian kept to the middle of the path and no harm came to him. Watchful is the pastor overseeing the souls of his flock; the lions represent the fears believers had to overcome when joining their local church - persecution was an ever-present threat after the restoration of the Monarchy in 1660. Christian asked the porter, whose house it was, 'and may I lodge here to night?' The reply came: 'This House was built by the Lord of the Hill: and he built it for the relief and security of pilgrims'. The porter asked his name and summoned 'a Grave and Beautiful Damsel', named Discretion, whose questioning of Christian suggests the careful screening of candidates for church membership. Her companions, Prudence, Piety and Charity ask him some searching questions and, when satisfied with his answers, invite him to meet the family. We note the welcome given to Christian, the meal provided for him, and a bed for his overnight stay in a room called Peace.³⁷

In the second part of the allegory, Christiana and her party are each greeted with a kiss. John H. Taylor comments:

Bunyan is giving us his own impression of church fellowship at its best. He does not lecture us, teaching us doctrine. He does not mention worship, sacraments or church government. He knows that doctrine has its place, but in the end it is the quality of church fellowship that counts most.³⁸

Christian must go on his way, but not before he has been shown 'Records of the greatest Antiquity' (the Scriptures), recording first the pedigree of the Lord of the Hill, and then 'the Acts that he had done', and the names of many hundreds that 'he had taken into his service . . . The next day they took him, and hid him into the Armory; where they shewed him all manner of Furniture . . . to harness out as many men for the service of their Lord, as there be Stars in the Heaven for multitude'.

The next day Christian got up to go, but was persuaded to stay longer. The women insisted on showing him the Delectable Mountains and Immanuel's Land, which increased his comfort. He was clothed in the armour he would need for spiritual warfare, and accompanied to the gate, and then to the bottom of the hill. There seems to be reluctance to part company, such is the closeness of the fellowship: 'Then I saw in my Dream, that these good Companions . . . gave him a loaf of Bread, a bottle of Wine, and a cluster of Raisins; and then he went on his way'.³⁹

So then, for Bunyan the local church is the place of relief for weary pilgrims, a centre of genuine comradeship, a school for students of the scriptures, and an armoury where believers may put on the equipment they need for the good fight of faith, including the weapon of 'All-Prayer'. The church is a place of spiritual sustenance for the saints as they prepare to go out to meet the world, the flesh and the devil. Having said that, it is clear that the Bedford church made room for all sorts and conditions of people. In his treatise, *A Case of Conscience Resolved*, Bunyan objects to the practice of the women meeting separately for prayer and identifies three types of worship: mixed (saints and unbelievers making up the congregation), the saints (church members alone, presumably participating in the Lord's Supper), and the elders, when they meet to discuss the duties and welfare of the church. He therefore allows that sometimes unbelievers will be present, because, after all, that is how he began his spiritual pilgrimage, as a seeker after truth. Christopher Hill refers to the passage in *The Holy City* where 'vagabonds, highwaymen, fornicators, liars, debtors, can all be received into the church'; but he adds: 'though one suspects they would have got short shrift if they had relapsed into these bad habits after joining the church'. At least we can deduce that Bunyan's church was far from being 'a little garden walled around': it was inclusive rather than exclusive, a rescue shop rather than a holy huddle.⁴⁰

As we have observed already, in Part II of *The Pilgrim's Progress* Bunyan has Interpreter instruct the damsel Innocent to take Christiana and her children to the Bath of Sanctification, where they were told that they must wash and be clean . . . 'they came out of that *Bath*, not only sweet, and clean; but also much enlivened and strengthened in their Joynts'. This implied reference to baptism appears to be a concession to his strict Baptist critics. But we note that Mercy is admitted to the wicket-gate by Christ its keeper, even though she had received no invitation from the King, but only from Christiana. The keeper of the Gate assures her: 'I pray for all them that believe on me, by what means soever they come unto me'.⁴¹

What was Bunyan's concept of ministry in the church? What were the functions of the minister in the congregational-type churches of his day? William Dell, Rector of Yelden, Bedfordshire, and Master of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge University, was a contemporary and close friend, and his views, as well as John Gifford's example, undoubtedly influenced Bunyan in his approach to ministry.

Dell was strongly opposed to university-based theological training. He said that

the saints needed no intermediaries trained and licensed by a university. They are created 'Masters in that mystery which none can teach but God himself; and which none can learn but true believers, who are born of God, and are his true disciples'. He believed that the conferring of divinity degrees by the University was contrary to the express command of Jesus Christ not to allow the practices of the Rabbis (in Matthew 23.8-12) and so was 'a mere invention of antichrist, to put honour and reputation on his ministers'. This was in the spirit of Samuel How, a Baptist cobbler-preacher of a previous generation, who thought 'humane learning irrelevant to the education of a true gospel minister'. He opposed learning as a substitute for God's grace in the making of a minister.⁴² Similarly, John Saltmarsh remarked, 'Surely it is not an University, a Cambridge or Oxford, a Pulpit and Black gowne or Cloak, makes one a true minister of Jesus Christ?' Geoffrey Nuttall writes that 'such attacks on learning did not make it easier for the men of the middle party to be in sympathy with lay preaching'. He quotes Richard Baxter, who said that 'Education is God's ordinary way for the Conveyance of his Grace, and ought no more to be set in opposition to the Spirit than the preaching of the Word'. Elsewhere Baxter stated that 'He that hath both the Spirit of sanctification, and acquired gifts of knowledge together, is the complete Christian, and likely to know much more than he that hath either of these alone'.⁴³

Bunyan was much influenced by the first minister of the Bedford Meeting, John Gifford, who played a significant part in his conversion. It is possible that Interpreter and Evangelist in *The Pilgrim's Progress* are characters based on Gifford's example in ministry, which helped to make Bunyan a disciple of Christ and eventually a minister himself. Bunyan had a high view of ministry, but a low view of learning. 'I have not borrowed my Doctrine from Libraries. I depend upon the sayings of no man: I found it in the Scriptures of Truth, among the true sayings of God'. 'My Bible and my Concordance are my only Library in my writings'.⁴⁴

Richard Greaves argues that, though the ministry was, for Bunyan, an important means of evangelism and of edification of the saints, he nevertheless insisted on the right of a local congregation to authorize one of their number to assume ministerial duties. As we have seen, this was the way in which he himself was appointed. As the pastor he had the responsibility, in his own words, 'to make Sinners by his preaching meet for the house of God'.⁴⁵ He believed that the preaching ministry was the chief means of evangelism: 'When God ordained a word of grace to save us, he also in his Decree provided Ministers to preach it to us to that end'.⁴⁶

Gordon Wakefield writes of the ideal of the gathered church as 'noble, inspiring and in some ways essential to Christianity'. He notes that in the Bedford congregation, 'in spite of transgressions of discipline, there are glimpses of a community of mutual care . . .'. Although there is a strong emphasis placed upon the significance of the ordinary church members, 'There is ministry in the gathered Church. The Giffords and the Bunyans are not ostensibly lords of faith but helpers of joy, yet they lead from the front, though not so far from the front that the

weakest and slowest lose touch with them'. In the second part of *The Pilgrim's Progress* there is 'no more noble figure than Great-heart', whom Wakefield calls

the soldier who fights giants on behalf of his pilgrim band; the exemplar of patient endurance who leads his people to the gate of heaven and returns again and again to fetch more; the expositor able to unravel the knottiest theological problem or case of conscience, who proceeds by dialogue not simply monologue. Such was Gifford and such was Bunyan.⁴⁷

In Bunyan's allegory, *The Holy War*, Emanuel's farewell address to Mansoul includes an exhortation to 'prize my noble Captains, their Souldiers and my mercy'.⁴⁸

Bunyan drew from the pastoral epistles the qualifications necessary in those who exercise ministry in the church: doctrinal soundness, the ability to teach, reprove, exhort; together with exemplary character and the competence to call the church together and direct its worship. But some might possess all these qualities and yet not be recipients of saving grace. They might be the means of grace to others and yet not possess 'the life, the power and saving operations of the justifying and preserving Grace of the Gospel'. In spite of his divinely-bestowed gifts, the minister was still a servant. 'Gifts make a Minister, and as a Minister one is but a servant to hew Wood, and draw Water for the house of my God'. When appointed to the pastoral office, the Bedford church book records that Bunyan gave himself up 'to serve Christ and his Church in that charge'. As a servant, his task was the conversion of sinners and the improvement of saints 'by that measure of Perfection that God hath appointed on this side Glory'.⁴⁹

Bunyan likens the minister's work to that of a porter, 'because as Porters stand at the Gate and there open to, or shut upon, those that make an attempt to enter in, so the Ministers of Christ by the Doctrine of the Twelve, do both open to, and shut, the Gates against the Persons that will be attempting to enter in at the Gates of this city'.⁵⁰

Bunyan did not grant that the minister had any authority over his congregation except as a channel of God's grace and truth. Richard Baxter's words would have met with his approval: that ministers were believers' 'Teachers, Fathers and instructors under Christ, who are helpers of their joy, though they have no dominion over their faith, and are Overseers, though not Lords and Owners of the Flock'.⁵¹

Clearly, as pastor of the Bedford Meeting, in years marked by persecution, Bunyan had much influence over his church members by his sermons, whether expressly evangelistic or preached for the purpose of edifying the saints, and by his pastoral care. He had an influence much further afield by means of his published works. But though set apart by the church from his secular calling, he did not consider himself in a class apart from his fellow church members. The church elders shared leadership; the church meeting deliberated and decided upon matters such as admission to membership and church discipline. He did not rule or dictate to his people. He preached with authority, but only as a servant of the Word, as he

understood it. He visited his flock, but not as their spiritual director or catechist (*pace* Baxter) but as their pastor. Such a concept of ministry, as R. L. Greaves has pointed out, meant that a much greater role would be allotted to the saints in the government of the church, as also in the government of the nation.⁵²

Finally, Bunyan urged that there should be a mutual relationship between the minister and his members. It was desirable that a minister 'be much used by Christ for the converting of sinners to himself, that he may build a temple with them'. But it was equally important for churches 'to let your ministers be beautified with your love that they may beautify you with their love'. On the one hand, let the churches love their pastors; on the other hand, let the ministers 'not sleep but be watchful, and look to the ordinances, to the souls of the saints'.⁵³ The biblical principle of the priesthood of all believers was firmly held and practised; it set free every believer, every church member, to exercise a particular ministry in the church and community; but Bunyan's church believed that the ascended Christ had given gifts for special ministry, so that the saints would be better equipped to exercise theirs.

From Bunyan's writings it becomes clear that he not only lays stress upon what B. R. White calls 'the theology of individual faith and salvation', but also on converts being encouraged to become active members of their local church. It is noteworthy, moreover, that he conceives of the church not only as 'a place for the relief and security of pilgrims', but as a kind of army barracks equipping its members with weapons, not carnal but spiritual, for their engagement with supernatural powers of darkness which, he believed, lay behind church and state hostility to Dissent.

NOTES

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- 9 G. Wakefield, *Bunyan the Christian*, 1992, pp.66-7.
- 10 *Minutes* p.17.
- 11 *ibid.*, p.20.
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