

# A TALK ON JOHN BUNYAN

by A. MELVILLE CLARK

**T**HIS talk, which was heard with great appreciation by a recent reunion of the Free Church Students' Association in Edinburgh, has been secured for THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY through the good offices of the Rev. G. N. M. Collins. Dr. Melville Clark is Reader Emeritus in Rhetoric and English Literature in the University of Edinburgh.

**W**HEN I was first asked to speak to you, a subject was suggested to me as one suitable alike for the audience, the occasion, and the speaker, namely: "The Contribution of Puritanism to English Literature".

Now that subject sounds all right. But a very brief reflection was enough to prove to me that it was all wrong, at least for anything less than a volume in some 500 pages. And even with that ample scope (though not too ample for the subject), the writer of the volume would soon find himself in difficulties and might never extricate himself from them. The centuries of Puritanism, the sixteenth and still more the seventeenth, are the most complex in the world's culture. Currents and cross-currents cut across each other beyond the power of man to distinguish. The cultural dispensation of the Middle Ages was by no means dead. The revived classicism of Renaissance humanism was by no means absolute. Traditionalism and modernism were at grips in every field of human endeavour, from literature, art, and philosophy to science, medicine, and statecraft. And at grips, too, were the mighty forces of Reformation and Counter-Reformation, each of them blending with, or modifying, or contradicting all the rest. The very terms one uses to name the warring forces are ill-defined and have very different connotations in the pages of writers belonging to different schools of thought.

The confusion becomes the worse confounded when one descends from the age in general to individuals in particular. I defy anybody to separate out (in a fashion acceptable to more than himself) the multitudinous strands that go to make up a Spenser, a Milton, or a John Donne.

Consider Donne for a moment and only in reference to his religious side. He was a Catholic by birth and by training. He became a High-Church Anglican by profession. And he was more

Puritan than many a Puritan in demonstrating the intensest individualism in religion in poem after poem and sermon after sermon—the conviction at the heart of Protestantism that each man must seek God without intermediary, whether priest or saint, whether church or sacrament, and that God speaks intimately and peculiarly to each man. Donne's religious poems and sermons indeed are the most arresting expression in English that I know of personal religion.

It would be very easy to find similar paradoxes in Spenser, and Milton, and many another great figure of the sixteenth or seventeenth century—to find many examples of persons whose minds were at odds with their creeds. But that would delay me still longer from the subject I have chosen in place of the one I have declined, namely: John Bunyan.

That humble person has had an extraordinary popularity. His books, especially one of them, have been more widely read by English-speaking people and more influential on their spiritual life than anything else written, save the Bible itself. There was a time, if not now, when a copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress* was to be found in every cottage in this country, not clean and unopened, but thumbed and soiled by repeated use. Nor was its appeal confined to Protestants or to the Anglo-Saxon world. It fascinated Catholics as well, Jews, Moslems, and Buddhists; and it has been translated into other tongues, beginning with Dutch, Flemish, French, Welsh, German, Polish, and Swedish soon after its publication in 1678, until now it has appeared in every civilized language and in many still barbarous to a number well over a hundred.

Its earlier popularity in Britain began of course with Bunyan's own persuasion and class, people with little education for the most part and no pretensions. It came into the houses of the well-to-do and the bookish at first through the nurseries, where the children read it as a thrilling romance at the knees of pious servants. Yes; *The Pilgrim's Progress* soon became a classic of the nursery; and that is probably where everyone in this room first read it. But of course it made its way with educated adults, too, until before the end of the eighteenth century it was an established and recognized masterpiece of literature. And so it is regarded and read to-day.

Bunyan, however, would have deeply regretted the implications of this result. For as the admiration has grown for *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and for the other works too, as literature, their spiritual influence has diminished. Some, no doubt, still read Bunyan for his teaching and inspiration. But in the main he is read for what he cared least about and would have despised, his literary charms.

I suppose that Bunyan is as completely integrated a Puritan as one could find in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, a Puritan *simpliciter*, standing squarely on the left wing of Protestantism. His religion is nothing if not personal. It is Bible-inspired and Bible-dominated. It is anti-prelatical and anti-papal. It is essentially non-conformist with respect to the State in question of faith and morals. And Bunyan's very lack of book-learning kept him the more unqualified in his Puritanism and made it of a very different brand from that of his great contemporary, John Milton.

The fact is that Milton's Puritanism, if the word can be applied to his position at all, was unique. It made him in the end a church with one member and a sect with one adherent. It was certainly hostile to Catholicism and Episcopacy, but scarcely less so to Presbyterianism, Congregationalism, the Baptist Union, and other Puritan bodies. His theological beliefs were decidedly heterodox, as can be seen from his final statement of faith, the *De Doctrina Christiana*, which he did not choose to publish in his lifetime and which in fact reached print only in 1825. His moral convictions were likewise peculiar, not least with regard to marriage and divorce. And his ideas on Church and State were no less his own. It is true that Milton, to quote the *De Doctrina*, "enrolled himself among the number of those who acknowledge the Word of God alone as the rule of faith." But it was the Bible as interpreted by a very learned man who took a very individual line and who had a complete confidence in his own rightness and a quite un-Christlike pride in maintaining it.

Milton is the most literary of all our poets in his inspiration. The ancient classics of Greece and Rome echoed and re-echoed in the majestic halls of his memory. But so also did English literature from *Beowulf* and Caedmon downwards, and the literatures of Italian, French, Spanish, and Dutch, not to mention Hebrew, Syriac, and still other languages. Nor was it merely literature in the sense of poetry and *belles lettres* that he was interested in: it was all knowledge: philosophy and theology, history and science, arts and crafts, geography and discovery, politics and polemics. For he had trained himself from youth by the most strenuous apprenticeship on record to be the great epic poet of Britain, perhaps indeed of the modern world; and an epic poem meant for him as for his contemporaries a kind of poetic encyclopaedia—an epitome of all culture holding suspended in itself all the best that was known and thought in its age. Milton's mind, therefore, was a whispering gallery of innumerable voices. He compelled them all to contribute to his end by the power of his personality.

Nevertheless his mentality was inevitably qualified by the riches of his culture. And so of course was his Puritanism to a degree that gave it a tone, an accent, an idiom without parallel in anybody else's.

Now Bunyan had an entirely different culture, if that word is not too pompous a term for his simple background. He was born into a poor bookless home; whereas Milton's was well-to-do, and books in abundance in several languages were there as a matter of course. Bunyan never knew any language but his own; and he was no great reader even in it. It is true that he received some elementary schooling, the mere rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic. But he "never went to school", he tells us, "to Aristotle or Plato." That is to say, he had no higher education whatever and no instruction or guidance from a trained mind. As soon as possible he was apprenticed to his father's own trade of a tinker or (to avoid the later associations of the word) a tinsmith or brazier. And when he was barely sixteen, he was pressed for service in the Parliamentary army during the Civil War.

His reading so far had been but light fare, as he tells us in an early book with the awesome title, *A Few Sighs from Hell; or, The Groans of a Damned Soul*.

The Scriptures, thought I, what are they? A dead letter; a little ink and paper of three or four shillings' price. Alas! what is the Scripture? Give me a ballad, a news-book, *George-on-horseback* or *Bevis of Hampton*. Give me some book that teaches curious arts, that tells of old fables.

In short what pleased him in his early and unregenerate days was the kind of penny chapbook sold to countryfolk by just such a pedlar as Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*, along with buttons and thread, pins and needles, ribbons and tape. Curiously enough, those very chapbooks with their naïve stories of knights in armour fighting dragons and giants later contributed some colour and incident to *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Holy War*.

But of course Bunyan was destined sooner or later to receive the full impact of the Bible. And what an impact it was! It came first, as he tells us, from the narrative books; it was only later that he was absorbed in the subtleties of Pauline theology. It is no exaggeration to say that Bunyan must have known the Bible in the superb rendering of the Authorized Version almost by heart. And its English united in a perfect blend with the homely speech of seventeenth-century Bedfordshire to make a style for Bunyan of surpassing purity, strength, and simplicity.

It is a style as different as it could possibly be from Milton's. Whereas Milton's English is magnificently artificial, Bunyan's is

colloquial and unstudied. Even so spoke Bunyan's neighbours all round him. But Milton's vocabulary, his turns of phrase, his grammar, and his syntax were all his own and unmistakably so.

As for the rest of Bunyan's reading, it included Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (from which he got most of the history he knew), sermons by Puritan divines, simple manuals of devotion or theology, and, apparently, a little English poetry, especially Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. And that is about the lot.

But education does not result automatically from being put to great schools and famous colleges at a large expense (though that is what many people mean when they say of some wastrel, "And to think he had such a good education!"). Such opportunities account at most for about five per cent. of the result; and the remaining ninety-five per cent. has to come, if it comes at all, from the pupil's own ability and industry. Bunyan, then, made the most of such poor opportunities as came his way. And ignorant as he was of much that a third-year schoolboy of today patters off with more readiness than understanding, he could do what modern schooling so often fails to teach: think, arrange his ideas, and express himself without muddle or waste. In any case, as J. A. Froude said, "His real study was human life as he had seen it and the human heart as he had experienced the workings of it"—subjects not taught in any school but the hard school of life itself.

Bunyan's written work was all didactic with the aim of teaching Christian faith and Christian duty as these were understood by Baptists in the seventeenth century. Much of his work is straightforward teaching by way of precept, exhortation, and exposition. But he is at his best when he teaches more indirectly by means of a story, either a true one from his own life or an allegorical invention.

As a preacher he had an extraordinary gift of gripping the attention of common people like himself with little or no book-learning, when he encountered two or three by the wayside or faced larger audiences in the market-town or in the Capital. His fame as the greatest nonconformist preacher of the day brought crowds all the way from London to Bedford, to hear him if they had missed him in the City, or to hear him again if they had not.

His preaching also landed him in prison. It was by no means such a strict confinement as it is sometimes represented. Bunyan was often out and about preaching, and was even able to visit London. Nevertheless his imprisonment was strict enough to afford long periods of solitude and silence in which he had time to read and meditate and find in himself unsuspected powers. And

so it was in prison that Bunyan wrote the four books on which his fame depends: *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*; *The Pilgrim's Progress*; *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*; and *The Holy War*.

These four books are interrelated, though each is complete and independent in itself. The first of them, *Grace Abounding*, is an autobiography, telling Bunyan's earlier life up to his tremendous and soul-shaking conversion. He has little or nothing to say in it about his outward history. He mentions scarcely a person or a place by name. He is entirely concerned with his unregenerate self, his growing realization of his lost condition, his earnest quest for escape, and his spiritual rescue. The result, as Macaulay says, is "one of the most remarkable pieces of autobiography in the world . . . a full and open confession of the thoughts which passed through the mind of an illiterate man, whose affections were warm, whose nerves were irritable, whose imagination was ungovernable, and who was under the influence of the strongest religious excitement." Yet I can quite understand how *Grace Abounding* might repel some by its morbid self-torture and its hell-fire terrors or provoke the scorn of others by its unsmiling naïveté.

*The Pilgrim's Progress* was given to the world as an allegory. And Bunyan was in some doubt about the reception a fictitious story might get from some of the stricter Puritans. But he justified his resort to fiction by the free use of similitudes in the Old Testament and by Christ's parables in the New:

Solidity, indeed, becomes the Pen  
Of him that writeth things Divine to men:  
But must I needs want solidness, because  
By Metaphors I speak? Was not God's Laws,  
His Gospel-Laws, in older time held forth  
By Types, Shadows, and Metaphors? . . .  
The Prophets used much by Metaphors  
To set forth Truth. Yea, who so considers  
Christ, His Apostles too, shall plainly see  
That Truths to this day in such Mantles be.

Allegory for him was not falsehood, but truth under a particular aspect; and *The Pilgrim's Progress* was to give a true picture of religious struggle and vicissitude under the similitude of a dangerous journey. The hero is meant to represent the typical Christian, every sincere traveller along the way of holiness who may yet stumble in it or swerve from it.

But the hero is also and in particular John Bunyan himself. And *The Pilgrim's Progress* gives the life-story of its author allegorized, the same story told indirectly as Bunyan had already told directly in *Grace Abounding*. Bunyan had set out from the City

of Destruction. Bunyan had been directed by Evangelist and Interpreter. Bunyan had been misled by Mr. Worldly-Wiseman to seek salvation in the Village of Morality and had gone astray with Hopeful in By-path Meadow. Bunyan had been bogged in the Slough of Despond and imprisoned by Giant Despair in Doubting Castle. Bunyan had been buffeted in Vanity Fair, had climbed the Hill Difficulty, had faced lions in the way, and had fought Apollyon in the Valley of Humiliation. Bunyan had lost his burden at the foot of the Cross. And Bunyan had visited the House Beautiful and sojourned in the Country of Beulah. If he had not yet himself traversed the Valley of the Shadow of Death and forded the fatal River to hear the trumpets on the other side, he knew that that great adventure was the one thing predictable and certain in any good man's life. In a sense, too, Bunyan was not only Christian; he was also Faithful and Hopeful and Valiant and Fearing. And he drew even the less amiable characters down to the very worst of them, from things in himself he recognized and abhorred.

Hence the power of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It is an allegory which seizes and holds the reader by its strong human appeal. Other allegories may amuse, like Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*; or charm, like Chaucer's *House of Fame* by its quaint conceits or like Spenser's *Faerie Queene* by its poetry. But no other allegory commands the attention as *The Pilgrim's Progress* does by evoking a keen, sympathetic concern and suspense. That is why Dr. Johnson declared that there was never "yet anything written by mere man that was wished longer by its readers, excepting *Don Quixote*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *The Pilgrim's Progress*."

What I have said applies more particularly to the original or first part of the allegory. As is the way with sequels, the second part is altogether weaker and less interesting. It is certainly comforting to know that Christiana and the children, whom Christian had left behind in his hurry to make his own escape from the City of Destruction, are to be saved after all. But Bunyan had already told us all we needed to know of the route. There are touches of genius, of course, in this repetition of the theme with variations. But the rugged simplicity has gone; and some sentimentality has crept in. It was no longer Bunyan's very own experience that dictated the allegorical parallel, but the chapbook romances he had devoured in his youth. Thus, as has been said, giants, dragons, and angelic champions figure too much, and suggest a spurious fairyland with a Baptist pastor in disguise figuring as a knight errant.

To return to the first part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, the relation between it and *Grace Abounding* is that of the indirect or allegorical and the direct or factual presentation of the same experience. *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman* stands to both of these other works in a relation of oppositeness. It presents, not a good man's journey to Heaven, but a sinner's descent to Hell. Strictly speaking, it is not an allegory. It is simply a realistic story of a man of Bunyan's own class and circumstances but with no savour of salvation in him, from his pernicious childhood to his death in the fulness of his sins. The story is not told straightforwardly but comes out in the course of a dialogue between Mr. Wiseman who knows all the facts and Mr. Attentive who comments in horror on them. And for it Bunyan had throughout the solid ground of real observation to go on, the shrewd, unexaggerating observation of reprobate life in seventeenth-century Bedford. There are no supernatural characters or incidents in this level-with-life novel, for such it is; and the draughtsmanship is so sure, the details of setting, speech, and occasion so minute and true, the psychology so convincing and acute, and the whole scheme and concept so free from caricature or distortion that we seem to be reading the history of a real person.

The relation of Bunyan's fourth great book, *The Holy War*, to *The Pilgrim's Progress* is that of a complement. *The Pilgrim's Progress* had allegorized the spiritual life as a long and arduous journey. *The Holy War* presents it under the similitude of a campaign. Bunyan's brief military service in the sixteen-forties may have suggested a little, but the wars in the Bible much more: in the Old Testament, the wars of Moses and the Judges, of Saul, David, and the Kings; and in the New, the book of *The Revelation* resounding with the shouts and songs of soldiers and ending with a vision of the City of Peace where they hang the trumpet on the wall and study war no more. Moreover military metaphors run through both the Old and the New Testaments: "the Lord of Hosts," "the Captain of our Salvation," "the whole armour of God," "the sword of the Spirit," "a good soldier of Jesus Christ."

Bunyan's story concerns the City of Mansoul, founded by Shaddai (that is, the Almighty) and owing allegiance to Him. We hear of the City's defection to Diabolus and his Blacks (that is, Satan and the rebellious angels); its recovery by the Son, Immanuel; its second lapse from loyalty and obedience, and its appeal to its Lord, seconded by the Lord Secretary (that is, the Holy Spirit); and finally, its happy restoration.

The scene of action in *The Pilgrim's Progress* had been the

hostile world outside and about the Christian. But the scene of action in *The Holy War* is inside the human soul, apart from brief episodes in Heaven or in Hell. The allegorical aptness of *The Holy War*, for the conveyance of its doctrine by means of a narrative parallel to the scheme of salvation, is so great that Macaulay declared the book would have been the best work of its kind if *The Pilgrim's Progress* itself had not existed. Nevertheless one has to admit that, by the nature of the case, *The Holy War* has far less human interest and appeal.

Well, there is no sincerer writer in any language than Bunyan, no writer who concentrated more absolutely on the substance to be conveyed, on the *what*, leaving the *how* to take care of itself. All that he cared about was the delivery of his message: "Woe is me, if I preach not the gospel!" He was fully aware of the temptation of the preacher to take pleasure in being himself admired. A friend, we are told, once complimented him after a service on "the sweet sermon" which he had just preached. "You need not remind me of that," Bunyan replied; "the devil told me of it before I was out of the pulpit." He never thought of his work as itself and end. It was merely a means to an end far greater than the means, the proclamation of the Christian truth as he understood it. Every other stylist, who deserves the name, has taken thought to achieve his effects. They have not sat down and dashed off chapter after chapter. Newman, for instance, sweated over every phrase; and Plato is said to have written the first sentence of *The Republic* in seventy arrangements before he was satisfied. Bunyan, on the other hand, was untroubled by phrasal and stylistic considerations. He never leaned his head on his hand to choose a word or turn a phrase. He simply fixed his eye steadily on the goal and went to it with an unerring instinct.

And there will never be another Bunyan. There will never be anyone again so direct and sincere and with such an unspoilt taste. We are all far too clever, superficial, and sophisticated now. Everyone has been taught to read—in a kind of way—but not taught to think, having read. For those to-day who read much (and many read more in a year than Bunyan did in his whole lifetime), books are abundant and cheap and, for that very reason, only too often a dope for the mind and a substitute for thinking for themselves. For those to-day who have not the patience or power of concentration to read books, there is the abundance of ephemeral stuff with more pictures than letterpress that loads, let us say, the station bookstalls: women's fashion magazines, motor-ing journals, holiday guides, and all the muck of the more or less

pornographic weeklies. And for everybody to-day, readers and non-readers, there are the radio cabinet and the television set. They provide their addicts (and who is not, to some extent, one of the bemused?) with a superficial smattering of information about many things but no convictions about anything, with many opinions but no values, and with no depth but glib answers by agnostics, atheists, and nothing-at-alls to the questions that have baffled simpler, humbler, and profounder souls from the days of Job downwards.

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