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Reformation  
& Revival



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**A** Christian may not always be conscious of the Holy Spirit's presence, but he would not even be a Christian in His absence.

*John Blanchard*

**A** great part of your prayer work should be imploring the Almighty for a greater measure of His Spirit.

*Walter Chantry*

**I**f it were possible to put the Holy Spirit into a textbook of pharmacology I would put Him under the stimulants, for that is where He belongs.

*D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones*

**I**f Pentecost is not repeated, neither is it retracted.... This is the era of the Holy Spirit.

*John Murray*

## *The Holy Spirit and Prayer in John Bunyan*

Michael A.G. Haykin

**I**n the edition of John Newton's works which Richard Cecil supervised for the press, Cecil includes a number of pages of Newton's "table-talk," occasional remarks made by Newton in the course of everyday conversation.<sup>1</sup> Among them is the following reflection on the ways of God with His servants:

The Lord has reasons, far beyond our ken, for opening a wide door, while he stops the mouth of a useful preacher. John Bunyan would not have done half the good he did had he remained preaching in Bedford, instead of being shut up in a Bedford prison.<sup>2</sup>

What Newton probably has in mind are the two evangelical classics which came from Bunyan's pen as a result of this imprisonment from 1660 to 1672, namely, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) and *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678 and 1684). Down through the centuries the vision contained within these two books has nourished believers and encouraged them in their pilgrimage. For instance, during the eighteenth century and the Evangelical Revival which dominated that period of time, these two books of Bunyan were read with great spiritual relish. As N.H. Keeble notes:

Leaders of the Evangelical Revival and of Methodism were inspired by him (i.e., Bunyan), returned to him often, and recommended him constantly. Howel Harris was a devoted reader. George Whitefield contributed a preface to the third edition of *The Works of John Bunyan* (1767). John Wesley more than once read through *The Pilgrim's Progress* (and other Bunyan titles) on horseback, and himself abridged it in 1743.... Methodist preachers made frequent reference to Bunyan, who exerted a formative influence on their own autobiographies.<sup>3</sup>

There were, however, other works written by Bunyan during his time of imprisonment, and though now not so well known, they are still deserving of consideration. One of

the earliest of these works is *I Will Pray With the Spirit*, written around 1662.<sup>4</sup> It is a powerful plea to the religious authorities of his day to recognize the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in the prayer life of the believer in the worship of the church. In what follows, the historical context of Bunyan's treatise on prayer is outlined, along with the course of its argumentation and its abiding significance.

#### The Historical Context of *I Will Pray With the Spirit*

The immediate cause for Bunyan's imprisonment in the county jail of Bedford in 1660 was his steadfast refusal to discontinue preaching at conventicles outside of the Church of England. But when, at his trial in January 1661, Bunyan was asked by Sir John Kelynge, one of the judges, to justify his absence from worship in the local parish church, Bunyan, true to his Puritan heritage, stated that "he did not find it commanded in the word of God."<sup>5</sup> Kelynge pointed out that prayer was a duty. Bunyan agreed, but he insisted that it was a duty to be performed with the Spirit's aid, not by means of the *Book of Common Prayer*, which set the structure for the worship service of the Church of England. Bunyan proceeded to argue:

Those prayers in the *Common Prayer-book*, was such as made by other men, and not by the motions of the Holy Ghost, within our hearts....The scripture saith, that it is the Spirit as helpeth our infirmities; for we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us, with sighs and groanings which cannot be uttered. Mark, ... it doth not say the *Common Prayer-book* teacheth us how to pray, but the Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

Bunyan's outright rejection of the use of written prayers cannot be understood apart from the views of his Puritan contemporaries and forebears.<sup>7</sup> John Calvin (1509-64), the spiritual father of English Puritanism, had defined prayer as

essentially an "emotion of the heart . . . , which is poured out and laid open before God." At the same time Calvin was tolerant of set prayers. Some of his spiritual children among the English Puritans, churchmen like Richard Baxter (1615-91), preserved both of these emphases. Many of the Puritans, however, took Calvin's view of prayer to its logical conclusion and saw little need for written prayers. Walter Cradock (c. 1610-59), a Welsh Congregationalist preacher and author, stated forthrightly:

When it may be the (poor Minister) ... would have rejoiced to have poured out his soule to the Lord, he was tied to an old Service Booke, and must read that till he grieved the Spirit of God, and dried up his own spirit as a chip, that he could not pray.

John Owen (1616-83), Bunyan's friend and admirer, similarly maintained that "constant and unvaried use of set forms of prayer may become a great occasion of quenching the Spirit."<sup>8</sup> Owen concluded that the use of written prayers is not intrinsically evil. But since the Spirit whom God has given to the believer is "a spirit of grace and supplication" (Zech. 12:10), the believer has all the resources that he needs for prayer. Moreover, Owen affirmed:

The Holy Ghost, as a Spirit of grace and supplication, is nowhere, that I know of, promised unto any to help or assist them in composing prayers for others; and therefore we have no ground to pray for him or his assistance unto that end in particular.

These criticisms of the *Book of Common Prayer* accurately reflect Puritan dissatisfaction with both the type and content of the prayers in this book. Moreover, undergirding the approach of both Cradock and Owen to prayer was an intense interest in the work of the Spirit in general and the accompanying recognition that only with His empowering

could God be rightly served and worshipped. Bunyan shares these perspectives on prayer and the Spirit, but states them in his own expressive way.

#### The Heart of Bunyan's Treatise

Bunyan's interest in extempore prayer, quickened by his debate with Kelynge, found written form not long after his trial in *I Will Pray With the Spirit*. There are no surviving copies of the first edition. The second edition, dated 1663, appears without a bookseller's or publisher's name on the title page. The title page simply states "Printed for the author." The book was probably too hot for any publisher to handle.<sup>9</sup> And no wonder, when Bunyan declared near the end of the book:

Look unto the Gaols in England, and into the Alehouses of the same; and I believe, you will find those that plead for the Spirit of Prayer in the Gaol, and them that look after the Form of mens Inventions only, in the Alehouse.<sup>10</sup>

Bunyan's tract on prayer opens with a "definition" of prayer which is somewhat reminiscent of Calvin:

Prayer is a sincere, sensible, affectionate pouring out of the heart or soul to God through Christ, in the strength and assistance of the Holy Spirit, for such things as God hath promised or, according to the Word, for the good of the church, with submission, in faith, to the will of God.<sup>11</sup>

The rest of the book takes up each individual item in this "definition." Understandably, it is his discussion of the clause "in the strength and assistance of the Holy Spirit" which forms the heart of his treatise, for it was this very point which was in dispute. In discussing this clause regarding the Spirit's role in prayer, Bunyan takes his start from Ephesians 2:18 and Romans 8:26-27. On the basis of these Pauline texts, Bunyan asserts that "there is no man, nor

Church in the world, that can come to God in Prayer but by the assistance of the Holy Spirit."<sup>12</sup> He then proceeds to detail ten reasons as to why the Spirit's aid is so vital when it comes to prayer. A consideration of the more important of these reasons brings the reader to the center of Bunyan's plea that the Spirit be allowed full freedom to work in the lives of men and women.

First, only by the Spirit can a person think rightly of the One to whom he prays. They then, not being able to conceive aright of God to whom they pray, of Christ through whom they pray ... how shall they be able to address themselves to God, without the Spirit help this infirmity?<sup>13</sup>

Bunyan is emphatic that the *Book of Common Prayer* is of absolutely no help when it comes to the imparting of such spiritual understanding. The Spirit, and He alone, can reveal the Father and the Son as the proper recipients of prayer. Then, second, only the Spirit can "shew a man clearly his misery by nature, and so put a man into the posture of prayer."<sup>14</sup> But such sensibility of sin would cause a man to flee from God's presence if it were not for the Spirit's encouragement to run to God for mercy. Moreover, it is the Spirit who enables a man to know the right way to come to God, namely, through the Son. "Men may easily say, they come to God in His Son: but it is the hardest thing of a thousand to come to God aright and in His own way, without the Spirit."<sup>15</sup>

Then, it is only the Spirit who can enable a person fully conscious of his sinful nature, to address God as "Father." Bunyan's discussion of this point is worth quoting in full:

O how great a task is it, for a poor soul that becomes sensible of sin, and the wrath of God, to say in Faith, but this one word, Father! I tell you, how ever hypocrites think, yet the Christian, that is so indeed, finds all the difficulty in this very thing, it cannot say, God is its Father.

Oh! saith he, I dare not call Him Father; and hence it is, that the Spirit must be sent into the hearts of God's people for this very thing, to cry, Father, Gal. 4:6; it being too great a work for any man to do knowingly, and believingly without it. When I say, knowingly, I mean knowing what it is to be a child of God, and to be born again. And when I say, believingly, I mean, for the soul to believe, and that from good experience, that the work of Grace is wrought in him; this is the right calling of God Father; and not as many do, say in a babbling way, the Lord's Prayer (so called) by heart, as it lyeth in the words of the Book. No, here is the life of Prayer, when in, or with the Spirit, a man being made sensible of sin, and how to come to [the] Lord for mercy; he comes, I say, in the strength of the Spirit, and cryeth, Father. That one word spoken in Faith, is better than a thousand prayers, as men call them, written and read, in a formal, cold, luke-warm way.<sup>16</sup>

Here Bunyan speaks from experience. The right calling of God "Father" comes not from the mere recitation of the Lord's prayer "in a babbling way," but from the inner work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>17</sup> Bunyan refers again to his own experience in prayer when he goes on to stress that only the Spirit can enable the believer to persevere in prayer once he has begun.

May I but speak my own Experience, and from that tell you the difficulty of Praying to God as I ought; it is enough to make your poor, blind, carnal men, to entertain strange thoughts of me. For, as for my heart, when I go to pray, I find it so loth to go to God, and when it is with Him, so loth to stay with Him, that many times I am forced in my Prayers; first to beg God that He would take mine heart, and set it on Himself in Christ, and when it is there, that he would keep it there (Psa. 86:11). Nay, many times I know not what to pray for, I am so blind, nor how to pray I am so ignorant; only (blessed be Grace) the Spirit helps our infirmities.

Oh, the starting-holes that the heart hath in time of Prayer! None knows how many by-ways the heart hath, and back-

lains, to slip away from the presence of God. How much pride also, if enabled with expressions? How much hypocrise, if before others? And how little conscience is there made of Prayer between God and the Soul in secret, unless the Spirit of Supplication be there to help?<sup>18</sup>

This passage displays a couple of the most attractive features of Puritan authors: their honesty and in-depth knowledge of the human heart. From personal experience Bunyan well knew the allergic reaction of the old nature to the presence of God. And he sees the use of written prayers as simply fostering and helping to cover up this desire to run from God. Indeed, were it not for the Spirit, none would be able to persevere in prayer. "A man without the help of the Spirit cannot so much as pray once; much less, continue ... in a sweet praying frame."<sup>19</sup>

This case for "free prayer" in the Spirit is well summarized by the following statements by Bunyan. The first comes near the end of his treatment of the Spirit's role in prayer in *I Will Pray With the Spirit*.

"When the Spirit get into the heart then there is Prayer indeed, and not till then."<sup>20</sup>

The second is quite significant in that it is reputed to be one of the statements Bunyan uttered as he lay dying in August 1688. "The Spirit of Prayer is more precious than treasure of gold and silver."<sup>21</sup>

It was Bunyan's conviction of the inner work of the Spirit—in prayer, preaching, and sanctification—which led him in the first place to embrace an ecclesial position outside the Church of England. Clearly, as this statement shows, it was this conviction which sustained him to the end of his life.<sup>22</sup>

#### The Significance of Bunyan's *I Will Pray With the Spirit*

Bunyan's treatise on prayer helped to secure what has become the traditional Baptist attitude to written and read

prayers: an attitude of extreme wariness. More significantly, Bunyan's treatise tackles an issue of perennial concern, namely, that of the relationship between the Spirit and ecclesiastical structure. Bunyan clearly comes down on the side of the Spirit. The Spirit must be allowed full rein in directing the worship of individual believers and of the entire church; in no way should his life-giving power in this regard be hindered. This emphasis on the Spirit reveals a dominant characteristic of Bunyan's thought and experience. As Richard L. Greaves has recently stated:

Although the various periods in Bunyan's career must be distinguished if we are to understand his development and the proper historical context of his works, his belief in the inner working of the Spirit and its implications for the Christian pilgrimage provided a unifying theme for his life as a Nonconformist.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, Bunyan's treatise can be seen as a declaration that without the Spirit not only our prayer life, but also our entire Christian walk is hollow, stale and lifeless. It is often forgotten that Bunyan and his fellow English Baptists were vital participants in what Ronald Reeve has described as the Puritan "rediscovery of the Holy Spirit as the main-spring of all Christian activity."<sup>24</sup> The claim by some contemporary authors and theologians that no post-Reformation movement until this century has really given the Spirit His due is shown to be quite false by the interest that the Puritans had in the person and work of the Holy Spirit. According to Garth Wilson, it was an interest which sprang from three sources in particular. First, the Puritans had "an intense desire for the experience of the Spirit." Second, they sought to bring reform to the ecclesiastical scene of Great Britain; and in seeking reform, they relied on the "Spirit of reform." Third, the Puritans were concerned to assert the deity of the Spirit against the anti-Trinitarians, notably the

Socinians.<sup>25</sup> The first two of these items are both evident in Bunyan's treatise on prayer, as some of the texts quoted above reveal plainly. But it is the first item, "the quest for the experiential rather than the formal," which lies at the heart of Bunyan's argumentation.<sup>26</sup> Thus, at the conclusion of the treatise, Bunyan expresses the hope that: "Christians ... pray for the Spirit, that is, for more of it, though God hath endued them with it already. ... The Lord in mercy turn the hearts of the people to seek more after the Spirit of Prayer, and in the strength of that, pour out their souls before the Lord."<sup>27</sup>

#### Author

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**End Notes**

- 1 *The Works of the Rev. John Newton* (London: George King, 1833), I, lxxi-lxxviii.
- 2 *Ibid.*, I, lxxxv. In 1776 Newton had contributed notes to one of the first annotated editions of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Part I.
- 3 "'Of him thousands daily sing and talk': Bunyan and his reputation" in his ed., *John Bunyan: Conventicle and Parnassus. Tercentenary Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 249-50.
- 4 For the date, see Richard L. Greaves, "Introduction" to his edition, *John Bunyan: The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded and I Will Pray With the Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), xl-xli. Subsequent quotations from *I Will Pray With the Spirit* will be taken from this text, which is the latest critical edition. For a recent modernization and abridgment of *I Will Pray With the Spirit*, see Louis Gifford Parkhurst, Jr., editor, *Pilgrim's Prayer Book* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale, 1986).
- 5 *A Relation of the Imprisonment of Mr. John Bunyan*, ed. W. R. Owens, *John Bunyan: Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Karmondoworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1987), 95.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 95-96.
- 7 The following discussion of "prayer in the Spirit" is indebted to Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (2nd. edition; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1947), 62-74; Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (London: Dacre Press, 1948), 98-114; Garth B. Wilson, "The Puritan Doctrine of the Holy Spirit: A Critical Investigation of a Crucial Chapter in the History of Protestant Theology" (Th. D. Dissertation, Knox College, Toronto, 1978), 208-23; Alan L. Hayes, "Spirit and Structure in Elizabethan Public Prayer" in E. J. Furcha, ed., *Spirit Within Structure* (Allison Park, Pennsyl-

vania: Pickwick Publications, 1983), 117-32. The texts cited from Calvin, Cradock and Owen are taken from these studies.

- 8 Owen helped Bunyan publish *The Pilgrim's Progress*. He is also said to have told Charles II that he would willingly give up all his learning if he could but preach like Bunyan. See Keeble, "Bunyan and His Reputation," 243.
- 9 Roger Sharrock, "'When at the first I took my pen in hand': Bunyan and the Book" in Keeble, ed., *John Bunyan*, 80.
- 10 *I Will Pray With the Spirit*, 284.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 235.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 246.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 249.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 251.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 251.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 252.
- 17 Greaves, "Introduction," xliii-xliv. See also Nuttall, *Holy Spirit*, 63-65.
- 18 *I Will Pray With the Spirit*, 256-66.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 259. Cf. also *ibid.*, 256-66.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 257.
- 21 *Mr. John Bunyan's Dying Sayings (The Works of John Bunyan)*, Philadelphia: John Ball Publisher, 1850), I, 57.
- 22 Richard L. Greaves, "Conscience, Liberty, and the Spirit: Bunyan and Nonconformity" in Keeble, ed., *John Bunyan*, 43.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 24 "John Wesley, Charles Simeon, and the Evangelical Revival," *Canadian Journal of Theology*, 2 (1956), 205.
- 25 "Puritan Doctrine of the Holy Spirit," 4-5.
- 26 Greaves, "Introduction," xlv.
- 27 *I Will Pray With the Spirit*, 271, 285.