

The Bunyan Christening, 1672.

ON 16 November, 1672, Joseph Bunyan, ye son of John Bunyan, was "baptized" or christened at the parish church of St. Cuthbert's, in Bedford. Was this the child of the great John Bunyan, or the child of his son?

Dr. Brown had little doubt on the matter when he wrote his standard life, and his opinion that Joseph was the child of the Dreamer has been accepted on both sides of the Atlantic, by Baptists and by Pædobaptists, though not without challenge, especially since the discovery of new facts which Dr. Brown himself communicated. This paper will present three reasons for believing that Joseph was his grand-child. One reason is a matter of dates and places, the others are matters of consistency between profession and practice in the church over which he presided, and in himself.

Much of the evidence is derived from parish registers, and it is important to notice that in the period under review, these were kept under three successive systems. The general system dates from 1538, when Thomas Cromwell enjoined parish ministers to institute registers. This injunction was supplemented by Elizabeth with a second, ordering that every year the incumbent should copy the whole of the year's entries, and send to the bishop. But an antiquarian tells us that "no injunction was more completely set on one side and broken; early transcripts are simply conspicuous by their absence." So when the Long Parliament was setting things in order during 1645, an Ordinance directed that the minister of every parish or chapelry should, in a fair register book of vellum, enter the name of each child christened, of the parents, of the time of birth and of christening. But the ministers were restive under the changes, and the Nominated Parliament completely altered the system. It was enacted that by 22 September, 1653, the rate-payers should choose a "Parish Register," to whom should be handed over all existing books. In future he was to enter publications and marriages,

births and burials; nothing was said about christenings, and for the next few years there is no official record of any christening. And the yearly transcript was no longer ordered, so that the sole contemporary evidence from 1653 to 1659 or 1660 is the entry of birth, made by the elected registrar. But when the old minister got back, or when a new conforming minister was installed, the old system of Elizabeth revived, having never been altered by royal authority. Unfortunately, the old carelessness revived also, and nothing is more tantalising than the absence of records where they might be reasonably expected.

Now Bunyan was born in November, 1628, and christened at Elstow parish church. No record is known as to the date or place of his first marriage. He was enlisted as a soldier, and as the war was virtually over by the beginning of 1646, that is the earliest probable date for his wedding. So his first child might perhaps be born in 1647, but no record is known.

His daughter Mary was christened at Elstow parish church on 20th July, 1650. In 1654 the registration of christenings had ceased, but among 24 entries of births made that year at Elstow, we find "Elizabeth, the daughter of John Bonyon, was borne 14th day of April, 1654." By this same wife he had two other children, John and Thomas: concerning the date and place of their birth, no record is known. It is clearly possible that this child John was born before 1650, though there is no evidence on the point.

A side issue may be noticed, that in 1660 Christopher Hall, the restored vicar of Elstow, copied the parish registers of 1650-1660, and forwarded the copy to the archdeacon's registry in Bedford, where it is more easily seen than the original. But Hall falsified his copy in one important respect, substituting for the word "borne" the word "christened" systematically, as if children were always christened on the day of their birth! Of course, in face of the original, the copy is worthless as evidence, and it is not necessary to waste time on the charge that Bunyan, while a member of a Gathered Church, had Elizabeth christened.

From the well-known and pathetic interview with Justice Hale in August 1661, we learn some more domestic history. Bunyan married again after August 1659. When he was apprehended in November 1660, his wife was dismayed at the news, "fell into labour and so continued for eight days." She was delivered, but the child died. Next year she was in charge of four small step-children, apparently John, Mary, Elizabeth, and Thomas. She herself is known to have borne a daughter Sarah, who in

1686 was married at St. Cuthbert's; but no record is known of this birth, whether in a parish register, or a church book, or a family Bible. Nor indeed, apart from the very entry we are investigating, is any entry known of the birth of any child of her's. Here is another illustration that records are decidedly scanty, even after the settlement of 1662.

From November 1660 till Bunyan's pardon on 17 May, 1672, with perhaps one short interval, he was technically in prison under the Conventicle Act of Elizabeth. This did not hinder his attending church meetings occasionally, or even his being chosen Elder and receiving the right hand of fellowship in a full meeting, December 1671. The laxity of jailers then is striking to us now, but is well attested in this and other cases. The laxity of course was exceptional, and practically as well as technically, Bunyan was in prison twelve years. So it may well be asked, if while Bunyan was legally and actually a prisoner in the county jail, he could also be regarded as a legal householder in the town.

In October, 1670, a parish subscription was made for poor Christians captive at Algiers. The system was common to send "briefs" to parish ministers from the bishop or from the Council, calling for such subscriptions: in many cases at a somewhat later date, the dissenting congregations made similar voluntary collections, but at this date they were themselves utterly illegal and were being constantly fined, so that they were in no position to contribute. On this occasion fifteen parishioners of St. Cuthbert's in Bedford subscribed, including "John Bunnian." Apparently this is the first time that this parish is mentioned in connection with the Bunyan family, whose elder members continued to live at Elstow for years after this. That this subscriber should be our Bunyan is highly improbable; he was a prisoner, he would not hear the brief read at St. Cuthbert's parish church, he had not so much money as would enable him to be one of only fifteen subscribers. Probably then we find here his son John Bunyan junior, who might now be twenty-three years old.

Moreover, the hearth-tax list for 1670-71 for St. Cuthbert's parish includes a John Bunyan, the legal occupier of a house in this parish. A prisoner could hardly be a house-holder and a tax-payer; this will clearly be the man who subscribed in October.

Bunyan was pardoned on 17 May, 1672, and was speedily at liberty, but there is no evidence where he took up his dwelling. Six months later the crucial entry was made. St. Cuthbert's, Bedford, 1672. Baptized Joseph Bunyan, ye son of John Bunyan, Nov. 16th. The prisoner who met his church in December, 1671,

may evidently have met his wife in February, 1672; but the probability is quite equal that John junior had married before this; and to this point we turn next.

John junior did marry and have at least one son, for he bequeathed property to his grand-daughter Hannah Bunyan. A tablet to her memory in "Bunyan Meeting" assigns her birth to 1694; if this date be correct, her father must have been married not later than 1693 and can hardly have been born later than 1675; so that John Bunyan junior must have been married by 1674, and may easily have been married earlier. But there is no record of his marriage, nor of any fact about Hannah's father, Christian name, birth, baptism, marriage, or death—(unless indeed the tablet has stated her age wrongly, and she be the third child of the very Joseph we are considering, about whom and whose two eldest children we are fairly well informed)—nor of any more of the family history of John junior, whether he had other children, &c. As all the known facts connect him with St. Cuthbert's parish, whose registers are not alleged to be in bad order, and as until 1693 he did not declare himself a dissenter, this absence of records is rather surprising, and decidedly disappointing. Any tangible fact here, which may yet be discovered in some distant parish where he wooed his wife, may convert much probability into certainty. But so far we are only entitled to say that John, junior, was married not later than 1674, and there is no reason against believing that he was married by 1670, when he may have been as much as 23 years old. His father, at the age of 22, certainly had a daughter, and Joseph had a son before he was 23.

Returning to certain fact, we know that in 1673-74, the list of 47 parishioners in St. Cuthbert's, assessed to the hearth-tax, included one, and only one, John Bunyan. Nor has a second assessment of any other John Bunyan been found. It is most reasonable to identify this tax-payer with the man who paid in 1670-71, and with the parishioner who subscribed in 1670, and with the parishioner who let his child be christened in 1672; that is, as we claim, with John Bunyan junior. There is no evidence to show where Bunyan senior lived at this time. His wife and children must have lived somewhere, and quite possibly lived in the house for which hearth-tax had been paid in 1670-71; but that would not prove that he was then, or was now, the legal occupier.

In October, 1672, he did become part-owner of a barn with a piece of land adjoining, in the parishes of St. Paul and St. Cuthbert; but this was for the purposes of worship, and it has

never been suggested that he and his wife lived in the barn. And since his name does not even stand first on the list of joint owners, it would be rather unnatural to hold that the part-ownership of these premises, in two parishes, would justify the description of him a month later as of St. Cuthbert's.

While we lack evidence as to where he lived, we have not even any evidence that he yet became a householder. He may well have lodged (when at home, for he travelled much, and was preaching at Leicester in October) in the house occupied by his son; close parallels to this are afforded by facts pleaded before Revising Barristers every year. The first evidence as to his abode is afforded by his arrest in 1675, when he was committed to the town jail, not the county jail, and therefore belonged now to Bedford. Then on 23rd December, 1685, he made a deed of gift to his wife, and described himself therein as of St. Cuthbert's. But this does not settle either the ownership of the house at any time, or the date when he took up his abode here. As to the son's abode, by his will in 1728 he left to Hannah the house in St. Cuthbert's, now occupied by Mr. Symonds, and the lease of the house where he was living. One such lease had been taken in 1705, another in 1716; but as the second had expired in 1727, there must have been a third; and perhaps there was one prior to 1705. We do not know when he moved there from St. Cuthbert's, we do not know when he bought the St. Cuthbert's house, we do not know when he began to live there. But the theory that he was occupying it, and was the legal occupier, in 1672, fits all the facts known.

As a John Bunyan was assessed here in St. Cuthbert's when the great Bunyan was in prison; and as John Bunyan junior may have been married by 1670, and certainly was by 1674, this line of argument renders it highly probable that the christening was for the child of the house-holder, John Bunyan junior.

We turn now to see whether the christening of a son is congruous with the principles of the church of which Bunyan was now Elder.

The church deliberately ignored the question of baptism within its own borders. When Gifford, the first pastor, died in 1655, he left a charge, warning the church to be indifferent as to externals; and one of the four points specified was baptism. Next year Sister Linford withdrew from it 'upon the account of baptism,' while Brother Crompe withdrew his proposal to join for the same reason. Thenceforward there is no reference to the ordinance in the church book (extant only in copy) till the year 1690. Bunyan, in a later book, to be quoted presently,

states that during 1657 several brethren of the baptized way assembled and sought to break them in pieces, merely because the members of this church were not in their way all baptized first. And in June, 1672, when he was Elder, the church refused to transfer Mrs. Tilney to a church which required baptism as a condition of church-membership.

If the church thus deliberately kept true to its principle of neutrality on this point, it was quite emphatic on non-conformity to the parish ministrations. On 13 November, 1668, Bunyan and another member were bidden by the church "admonish Brother Merrill concerning his withdrawing from the Church, and his conformity to ye world's way of worship." And on 21 April, 1671, by Bunyan's advice, the church excluded Robert Nelson because "in a great assembly of the Church of England he was openly and profanely bishoped after the Anti-Christian order of that Generation; to ye great profanation of God's order." Confirmation then, was inconsistent with membership in this Church. Equally so would be infant baptism by an Anti-Christian minister.

Another case occurred in 1674, when a member wished to join Jessey's old church, which had gone over to the strict communion position; this was felt a very unkind cut just after Bunyan had quoted Jessey as supporting him, and the church refused to transfer her. But, it may be said, Bunyan was the Elder of the church; would they discipline him? Let us see. On the very day that he was called to that post, other men were called to the ministry, including Nehemiah Cox. This man was of a good family, which, two generations earlier, had given a bishop to Ely. His own father, Benjamin, had thrown up a living for conscience sake, and had laid a good foundation of evangelical truth in this very town of Bedford; he then had gone to London and had taken a foremost place among Baptists there. Now on 7 May, 1674, this Nehemiah Cox, a minister of the church, was publicly charged in full meeting with words and practices tending to make rents and divisions, and he had to apologise. Would then a church, which in 1668, 1669, 1671, 1672, and 1674 dealt thus with its members, even with an officer, have connived at the scandal of its Elder sending his child to be christened at the anti-Christian church in 1672.

It may be objected that while Bunyan himself did not arrange the christening, nor approve of it, yet there is no reason against his wife doing this, without his knowledge. Such a solution has actually been proposed of late, and therefore it ought to be tested. Little need be said as to the general relations

between husbands and wives in that day, and the likelihood that any wife would thus defy her husband's wishes. We know something of the loyalty of this wife to her husband by her affecting appeal on his behalf. And we know well the earnest way in which this church watched over the life of its members. When the New Testament stipulates that an Elder must be able to keep order in his own household, this church could hardly condone weakness in a man who winked at his wife's act, or tolerated her revolt against his authority.

Moreover, there would have been a worse than merely local scandal. In 1672 and 1673 Bunyan was involved in a keen controversy with some London Baptists on a point closely touching infant baptism. And this brings us to the third argument, that he was never challenged publicly as inconsistent from any side, and that he betrays no sense of inconsistency at any time, or of any need of explaining his doings.

About May, 1672, he prefaced and published his Confession of Faith. This dealt expressly and minutely with the open-communion position of his church; the title declared "that though I dare not communicate with the Open Profane, yet I can with those visible Saints that differ about water baptism." To the reader he declared that "neither can I in or by the superstitious inventions of this world, consent that my soul should be governed in any of my approaches to God." He had, of course, to speak much of baptism, and there is not a word to show he approved of infant baptism; on the contrary he said plainly, "he must be a visible saint before, else he ought not to be baptized." "None ever received it [baptism] without light going before, unless they did play the hypocrite." "It is a sign to the person baptized, and an help to his own faith; he should know by that circumstance that he hath received remission of sins; if his faith be as true as his being baptized is felt by him."

While thus clear on baptism being for believers only, he was equally clear as to the Established Church. It was objected that his principles would lead him to have communion with the members of Antichrist: if a visible saint might yet stand a member of that sinful number. He replied, "You suppose an impossibility, for it cannot be that at the same time, a man should visibly stand a member of two bodies diametrically opposite one to another." In his application he introduces one of the open profane asking, Why cannot we be reckoned saints also? we have been christened, we go to church, we take the communion. And he replies, "Poor people! This will not do, &c."

This book called forth an answer by Paul and Kiffin, who asked why if he stickled so for holiness as the term of communion, he indulged the members of his church in many acts of disobedience. It would have been a far more stinging question why he let his own infant be christened. The christening of November, 1672, was not done in a corner, and Bunyan had enemies enough for this to be reported if it had been his son. Why did not Paul and Kiffin taunt him with this personal disobedience instead of with conniving at the disobedience of others? But so far were they from this, that Kiffin, when re-publishing in 1681—the original is not accessible—explains that his argument is with “Dissenting Brethren, of the Baptized way only,” who grant “that the Administration of Baptism by Rantism, or Sprinkling in Infancy, is disorderly.”

To this book Bunyan replied in 1673, and shows that by a slip in argument, Kiffin apparently grants his own position, “if a man do repent him of his christening in his childhood, he may be received into fellowship without submitting to baptism; but I will not strain you too far.” Christening, then, is a thing to be repented of, in Bunyan’s opinion. In his seventh argument he implies that he and Kiffin are at one against “those expositors that expound certain Scriptures for infant baptism, and that by them brand us [Bunyan and Kiffin] as anabaptists.” Again he speaks of “the brethren which refuse to be baptized as you and I would have them.”

Then he comes to the charge that he indulged his people in acts of disobedience, and asks that one be specified: the response is, In the sin of infant baptism. To which Bunyan replies, “We indulge them not; but being commanded to bear with the infirmities of each other, suffer it; it being indeed in our eyes such.” Infant baptism is in Bunyan’s eyes an infirmity, if not a sin, in 1673.

Yet no one ever jeered at him for committing that very sin last year, or objected that he let his wife commit it.

And infant baptism by a parish minister would be doubly wrong in his view, as it involved dealing with Antichrist, and calling in the help of one of a “gang of rabbling, counterfeit clergy,” as he had publicly styled the parish ministers in his *Justification by Faith*, published in February, 1671-2.

Kiffin, then, never charged Bunyan with committing the sin of infant baptism; his church never disciplined him for having intercourse with antichrist. There is no word that one of the “counterfeit clergy” rejoiced in having this effectual recantation of the hard phrase. Nor—and this is more important

—is there any sign in the abundant literature by Bunyan himself that he repented of any flagrant inconsistency, or that he was one who, in the midst of a controversy closely touching infant baptism, “did play the hypocrite.”

But John Bunyan junior was in quite a different position. Deprived of a father's care after the first years of boyhood, he had never taken any step towards identifying himself with his father's church; nor indeed did he join it till 1693, when the days of persecution were over. That he should take a son to be christened at the parish church would be such a normal thing that no one would comment on it. Certainly it was out of harmony with his father's wishes; but then, his father was the exception. Few people would be so ungenerous as to laugh publicly at Thomas Kerchever Arnold for being unable to persuade his children to follow in his footsteps; or as to taunt John Bright if a son of his conformed to the usual custom rather than to his father's singular views. The matter might pain Bunyan, and his words to Kiffin may have been written with this very incident in mind, Being commanded to bear with the infirmities of each other, we suffer infant baptism; it being indeed in our eyes an infirmity; but in theirs they say a duty, till God shall otherwise persuade them. If this is the way he felt towards a fellow-member, he could hardly feel very differently towards a son, still in the bonds of antichrist.

Legal demonstration there is none, either way. The moral probability is extremely high that the man whose child was christened in 1672 was not the Elder of the Gathered Church, but his son John Bunyan junior.

W. T. WHITLEY.

A Marriage Certificate of 1673 or 1674 is on an early page of the ancient Mill Yard Church book, and shows that Seventh-day Baptists, Calvinist and Arminian, were on friendly terms:—These are to certifie all whom Itt may Concern that Mr ffrancis Bampheild and damaris Town were Married upon ye 23 of Sept: according To the Rule of gods word: wherof we are wittnes. whose names are under written

Will: saller
Joh: Coats

Chris: nicholson
Henry: soursbey