

‘Grace Abounding’ Imputed Righteousness in the Life and Work of John Bunyan

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In *The Pilgrim’s Progress* John Bunyan tells us that at the cross not only did Christian lose his burden but he was also given a change of clothing: his rags were taken away and replaced by a new outfit. Not long after that glorious exchange he was troubled to see two men come tumbling over the wall into the way that leads to the Celestial City. He soon discovered that these two characters, Formalist and Hypocrisy, believed that they were well on the way to Heaven although they airily dismissed any suggestion that they ought to have entered the Christian life by the strait gate. Inevitably this led to controversy between Christian and the newcomers who began to comment on Christian’s clothes, saying.

we see not wherein thou differest from us, but by the coat that is on thy back, which was, we trow, given thee by some of thy neighbours, to hide the shame of thy nakedness.

Christian replied,

As for this coat that is on my back, it was given me by the Lord of the place whither I go; and that as you say to cover my nakedness with. And I take it as a token of his kindness to me; for I had nothing but rags before. And besides, thus I comfort myself as I go: Surely, think I, when I come to the gate of the city, the Lord thereof will know me for good, since I have his coat on my back—a coat that he gave me freely in the day that he stripped me of my rags.¹

In this piece of allegory John Bunyan shows that his understanding of the doctrine of imputed righteousness was that of the Reformers and also of his orthodox Puritan contemporaries. For that reason there is no need to elaborate his doctrine in this paper. Rather I want to note his main writings on the subject and then to ask why he wrote as he did. Before this it is important to recall his life in outline.

1. The Life of John Bunyan

John Bunyan lived through some of the most momentous years that this nation has ever experienced. Born at the beginning of Charles I’s eleven years’ tyranny, caught up in civil war while still a teenager, his early Christian experience was gained while religious and political opponents debated and sometimes fought for the heart and mind of the nation. His own convictions were tested in the sorrows of years of persecution, the official end of which he never saw, although in his last years he does not seem to have been greatly hindered in the exercise of his ministry. Before that comparative freedom he suffered years of imprisonment and more than once was threatened with the gallows. Of Bunyan the late G.M. Trevelyan wrote,

the author of *Pilgrim’s Progress* was not only a great writer and a powerful religious teacher, he was also an Englishman who had mixed in all the common traffic of humanity,—war, trade, fatherhood and marriage,—who shrewdly observed his fellow men and women and was by no

means devoid of humour. And so,—as the literary authorities tell us,—he founded the English novel, though such was not his design as an author, but only to win for Christ Jesus poor souls lost in the dark as he himself had once been lost.²

John Bunyan was born in 1628 in the village of Elstow about a mile from the county town of Bedford. His parents, John and Margaret Bunyan, were poor but he later recorded that it pleased God to put it into their hearts to put me to school to learn both to read and to write; the which I attained according to the rate of other poor men's children; though to my shame I confess I did soon lose that little I learned.³

How long he stayed at school we have no means of telling, but in his sixteenth year there were changes which shook him profoundly. First his mother died in June, and then a month later his sister died, and in yet another month his father married again. It is perhaps not surprising to discover that later that same year, on 30th November John Bunyan, at sixteen years of age, was enlisted in the Parliamentary army. It was towards the end of the Civil War and he saw little or no fighting, being mainly employed in garrison duties in the southern Midlands. Whatever difficulties and sorrows John Bunyan may have faced at home in the months before his enlistment the army must have proved a rough contrast. Inevitably the village boy would have faced tough discipline and would have lived with hardened soldiers as well as with the usual knaves and adventurers who are drawn towards a roving life. On the other hand, we must remember that it was an unusual force that he entered. The army was the scene of intense debates, political and religious. Stationed at Newport Pagnell in Buckinghamshire there would have been opportunities to hear contrasting preachers. For example, there was Colonel Paul Hobson, a Baptist army officer who was also stationed at Newport Pagnell and often preached to his troops. Also there was the official chaplain at Newport Pagnell, Thomas Ford, a member of the Westminster Assembly.

The years after his discharge from the army in 1647 seem to have been a time of defiant irreligion interposed by the smitings of a guilty conscience. He confessed later that he was of blasphemous speech and a Sabbath breaker. Although a profane young man, in 1649 he married the daughter of godly parents who brought with her two significant books, Arthur Dent's *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* and Lewis Bayley's *The Practice of Piety* both of which he read noting,

though they did not reach my heart, to awaken it about my sad and sinful state, yet they did beget within me some desires to reform my vicious life and fall in very eagerly with the religion of the time.⁴

For a time he set about religious observance until he was convicted by a sermon on Sabbath observance preached by the vicar of Elstow. Defiantly that same Sabbath afternoon he went out with his friends to play a game of cat on Elstow village green only to be brought more powerfully under a sense of his own guilt. God continued to deal with him, deepening his awareness of sin and eventually bringing him to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, events so powerfully narrated by Bunyan himself in his *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. He was introduced to John Gifford, pastor of the Independent Church in Bedford, which he joined in 1653. With the approval of the Church he began to preach in 1655 and tells us that, 'they came to hear the Word by hundreds and that from all parts'. It was at about this time that his first wife died, leaving him alone with his small family.

After the restoration of Charles II in 1660 John Bunyan was one of the first of the Puritan preachers to be arrested and, after a series of unfair trials, began his first twelve years' imprisonment. Although there were times when he was allowed out of prison his freedom was not properly restored until 1672. Nevertheless, the Bedford Church, anticipating his release, elected him pastor in 1671. Another two years of imprisonment followed from 1674 to 1676 before Bunyan was finally released largely as a result of John Owen's intercession with the Bishop of Lincoln. John Bunyan had been writing before his first imprisonment and had continued to do so during the long years of incarceration. In 1678 his greatest work, *The Pilgrim's Progress* appeared. After his last imprisonment Bunyan had twelve years of freedom and these were employed in preaching, pastoring and writing.

In August 1688 he had a preaching engagement in London but agreed to visit Reading en route so that he could attempt a reconciliation between an estranged father and son. Riding away from Reading he was soaked in a downpour of rain. He preached in London but it soon became apparent that he was seriously ill and after an illness of ten days he died on 31st August 1688.

2. John Bunyan's Writings on Imputed Righteousness

The subject of imputed righteousness is referred to again and again in the writings of John Bunyan but he examined the subject explicitly in two works. The first was *A Defence of the Doctrine of Justification by Faith in Jesus Christ*, 1671, hereinafter referred to as *The Doctrine of Justification*. Later he wrote *Of Justification by an Imputed Righteousness*, a shorter piece found among his papers at the time of his death in 1688. This will be referred to as *Imputed Righteousness*. A statement in *Grace Abounding to the chief of sinners* gives some indication of the importance that Bunyan attached to this subject. Reviewing his preaching ministry which had begun some ten or eleven years earlier he noted, 'I never cared to meddle with things that were controverted, and in dispute among the saints, especially things of the lowest nature'.⁵

By the middle of the seventeenth century the doctrine of implied righteousness was being questioned by teachers of some standing in England. These men had been influenced by developments on the Continent of Europe. One was the Arminian, John Goodwin, pastor of an Independent church in London, who published a defence of general redemption entitled *Redemption Redeemed* in 1651. Another was Richard Baxter who argued that Christ's sacrifice secured for us a new law, the obedience of which by faith secures our salvation. James Buchanan wrote that according to this doctrine

the immediate ground of our justification is, not the imputed righteousness of Christ, but the inherent, personal righteousness of the believer himself, which begins with faith, grows with sanctification, and is completed and made sure only by final perseverance.

Whether Bunyan was aware of the teaching of John Goodwin and Richard Baxter in the 1650s is not certain. What is certain is that he had been forced to examine and defend his position against certain ready disputants nearer home. The vigour with which he took up the subject makes it clear that, peaceable man though he was, he believed it to be too important to neglect.⁶

Bunyan's convictions were strong enough to force him into print in 1672 with his book, *The Doctrine of Justification*. This was written in response to a book written by Edward Fowler, and entitled *The Design of Christianity*. Fowler, at the time vicar of Northill near Bedford, had been a Presbyterian in Commonwealth days and was ejected from the Church of England in 1662. Unlike his father and brother, also ejected ministers, Edward Fowler subsequently conformed, was reinstated and later was appointed Bishop of Gloucester. In 1670 Fowler published *The Principles and Practices of Certain Moderate Divines of the Church of England*. This was a defence of the increasingly popular Latitudinarian school of theology. The Latitudinarians were seventeenth century religious rationalists who dismissed the experiential theology of the Puritans as 'enthusiasm'. Fowler attacked the doctrine of predestination and also what he called, 'the antinomian opinion of imputed righteousness'. Within a year Fowler followed up this book with *The Design of Christianity* in which he sought to show that the purpose of Christianity was to reform men's lives and purify their natures and so restore man to the state of Adam before the fall. He wrote 'the free Grace of God is infinitely more magnified, in renewing our Natures, than it could be in the bare justification of our persons'.⁷

Bunyan was deeply suspicious of Fowler because of his changes of opinion, which had caused others to stumble. He wrote of those ministers

who in the face of the world, after seeming serious detestings of wickedness, have for the love of filthy lucre, and the pampering of their idle carcasses, made shipwreck of their former faith and that feigned good conscience that they had. From which number, if you, Sir have kept yourself clear, the less blood of the damned will fall on your head: I know you not by face, much less by your personal practice; yet I have heard as if blood might pursue you, for your unstable weathercock spirit, which doubtless could not but stumble the weak, and give advantage to the adversary to speak vilifyingly of religion.⁸

In one of his most fervent pieces of writing Bunyan accuses Fowler of perverting Scripture and being unfaithful to the doctrines of his own church. Against the vicar he quotes in full articles 10, 11 and 13 of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England and continues,

these articles, because they respect the points in controversy betwixt Mr. Fowler and myself; and because they be also fundamental truths of the Christian religion, as I do heartily believe, let all men know that I quarrel not with him, about things wherein I dissent from the Church of England, but do contend for the truth contained, even in these very articles of theirs, from which he hath so deeply revolted, that he clasheth with every one of them, as may farther be shewn when he shall take heart to reply.⁹

Bunyan, at that time imprisoned for his nonconformity, was anxious to show that his debate with the vicar was no part of his dissent from the Church of England. He proceeded to show that Fowler's position was closer to that of Edmund Campion, the Elizabethan Jesuit, and to William Penn the Quaker. His quotations from Campion led to the suggestion in an abusive anonymous pamphlet that a 'wretched scribbler . . . grossly ignorant' like John Bunyan 'infamous in Bedford for a pestilent schismatic' could not have written the *Doctrine of Justification*.¹⁰

In the *Doctrine of Justification* Bunyan does not defend the doctrine of imputed righteousness in great detail. Both disputants were ranging over a wider field. He does however quote Fowler as saying, "The holiness which is the design of the religion of Christ Jesus,—is not

such as is subjected in anything without us, or is made ours by a mere external application”’. To which Bunyan replies,

These words secretly smite at the justification which comes by the imputation of that most glorious righteousness that alone resideth in the person of the Lord Jesus; and that is made ours by an act of eternal grace, we resting upon it by the faith of Jesus.¹¹

To assert that we are justified by our own righteousness Bunyan believed undermines the gospel itself. He told Fowler,

Wherefore the holiness that hath its original from us, from the purity of the human nature (which is the thing you aim at) and that originally as you, term it, is the dictates thereof, is the religion of the Socinians, Quakers, etc., and not the religion of Jesus Christ.¹²

Towards the end of his life John Bunyan returned directly to the subject of imputed righteousness. Among the papers discovered at his death there was a manuscript entitled *Justification by an Imputed Righteousness*. In this work the question of imputation is addressed in greater detail than in the earlier work on justification. Bunyan’s concern now was pastoral rather than controversial. He aimed at dealing with any tendency to self-righteousness among Christians and to bring unbelievers to look to Christ alone for justifying righteousness.

As he addressed himself to Christians he sought to bring home to their consciences the seriousness of sin and so to realize the absolute necessity of the righteousness of Jesus.

This rule I would have all receive that come to Jesus Christ for life and salvation—1. Not to stick at the acknowledgement of sin, but to make that of it which the law makes of it: ‘Acknowledge thine iniquity’, saith the Lord. This is a hard pinch, I know what I say, for a man to fall down under the sense of sin by acknowledging them to be what the Lord saith they are . . . 2. If we would come to Christ aright, we must *only* acknowledge our sins; we must **ONLY** acknowledge them, and there stop; stop I say, from attempting to do aught to present us good before God, but *only* to receive the mercy offered . . . In the matter of thy justification thou must know nothing, see nothing, hear nothing, but thine own sins and Christ’s righteousness.¹³

Bunyan was anxious about the spiritual state of those Christians who considered that they were now beyond the basic truths of the gospel, a type still with us. He imagines such persons saying, ‘I see not that in Christ now, that I have seen in him in former days. Besides I find the Spirit leadeth me forth to study other things’. He warns the objector that the fault lies in him and that Christ

is the same, as fresh and as good, and as full of blessedness, as when thou didst rejoice in him . . . God is never weary of being delighted with Jesus Christ, his blood is always precious with God; his merits being those in which justice hath everlasting rest, why shouldest thou wander or go about to change thy way?

It is to the Christian who has lost his sense of the importance of this glorious doctrine that Bunyan cries, ‘Guilt is to be taken off now as it was years ago; and, whether thou seest it or no, thou sinnest in all thy works’.¹⁴

Finally, in this work John Bunyan turns to the unbeliever,

Ah how many thousands that can now glory that they were never troubled for sin against God; I say, how many be there that God will trouble worse than he troubled cursed Achan, because their peace, though false, and of the devil, was rather chosen by them than peace by Jesus Christ, then 'peace with God by the blood of his cross'. Awake, careless sinners, awake! and rise from the dead and Christ shall give you light. Content not yourselves with either sin or righteousness, if you be destitute of Jesus Christ, but cry, O cry to God for light to see your condition by; for light in the Word of God, for therein is the righteousness of God revealed. Cry therefore for light to see this righteousness by; it is a righteousness of Christ's finishing, of God's accepting and that which alone can save the soul from the stroke of eternal justice.¹⁵

3. The Reasons for the Strength of John Bunyan's Convictions

To understand the strength of John Bunyan's convictions on the subject of imputed righteousness we need to consider his own pilgrimage. At a very early stage in his search for the truth he tells us in *Grace Abounding*:

I met with some ranters' books, which were highly in esteem by several old professors: some of these I read, but was not able to make any judgment about them: wherefore as I read in them, seeing myself unable to judge, I would betake myself to hearty prayer.¹⁶

A number of ranters known to Bunyan fell into the grossest practical antinomianism. Although Bunyan's understanding of the gospel, at this time was defective and he was still unsure of his own salvation he was driven to a close study of the Pauline epistles. The influence of the ranters did not last long in Bedford but another burgeoning group was perhaps an even greater threat. The Quakers were perceived by Bunyan to be as serious a threat to the gospel and more likely to win support among the Christians he knew. More recent writers from George Offer to Christopher Hill have criticised John Bunyan for linking the Ranters and the Quakers. In fact Quakerism covered quite a wide spectrum of teaching in the middle of the seventeenth century, much of it differing considerably from the Evangelical Quakerism which existed in the early nineteenth century. Barry Reay, a modern writer on the subject, has pointed out that the Quakers of the 1650s were not very interested in theology and when they did make statements it was often to define their teachings in terms of denials of what other people were teaching and doing. Thus they inveighed against the doctrine of predestination and against the teaching of an objective atonement. He quotes a Quaker speaker saying that 'Shee had known ye Lord if shee had never seen nor read ye Scriptures'. Bunyan and his contemporaries perceived that a heavy emphasis on immediate experience was being used to undervalue the objective work of Christ.¹⁷

Before Bunyan wrote his book *Imputed Righteousness*, there appeared in 1678, a definitive exposition of the Quaker position, Robert Barclay's *Apology for the Quakers*. He wrote of justification,

as many as resist not this light, [Jesus Christ], but receive the same, in them is produced a holy pure and spiritual birth; bringing forth holiness, righteousness, purity and all those other blessed fruits which are acceptable to God. By which holy birth (to wit, Jesus Christ formed within us, and working his works in us) as we are sanctified, so are we justified in the sight of God.¹⁸

Bunyan had taken up the challenge of the Quakers over twenty years before Barclay's *Apology* had appeared. In his first published work, *Some Gospel Truths Opened*, 1656, he gave a statement of the objective work of Christ and concluded with some questions to the

Quakers, 'who are possessed with a spirit of delusion in this generation'. By this time Quaker preachers had been busy in Bedford and district and Bunyan had been involved in public dispute with them. They presented no small threat to the Baptist and Independent churches of the Commonwealth period. Barry Reay has written,

The Quakers' success was impressive. Within a decade there were certainly from 35,000 to 40,000 Quakers (men, women and children), perhaps as many as 60,000. They were as numerous as Catholics, more numerous than Fifth Monarchists and Baptists.¹⁹

The extent of the problem can be seen when it is noted that in these years the large Broadmead Baptist Church in Bristol lost a quarter of its members to the Quakers.

Bunyan's concern was more than a concern for the prosperity of his own church or those like his own. Never a party man, he could see that the gospel itself was threatened by the teachings of many of the sects. He tells that early in God's dealings with him he came to realize that he needed a righteousness better than anything he could produce. He writes,

I observed, though I was such a great sinner before conversion, yet God never much charged the guilt of my sins of ignorance upon me; only he showed me, I was lost if I had not Christ, because I had been a sinner; I saw that I wanted a perfect righteousness to present me without fault before God, and this righteousness was nowhere to be found but in the person of Jesus Christ.²⁰

In his concern to understand Scripture his greatest help at this stage came from Martin Luther. He wrote,

I did greatly long to see some ancient godly man's experience, who had lived some hundreds of years before I was born: well, after many such longings in my mind, the God, in whose hands are all my days did cast into my hand, one day, a book of Martin Luther's; it was his comment on the Galatians; it was so old, that it was ready to fall from piece to piece, if I did but turn it over. Now I was pleased much that such an old book had fallen into my hands; the which when I had but a little way perused, I found my condition in his experience, so largely and profoundly handled as if his book had been written out of my heart. This made me marvel; for thus thought I, this man could not know anything of the state of Christians now, but must needs speak and write the experience of former days.

Bunyan went on to declare, 'I do prefer this book of Martin Luther upon the Galatians (excepting the Holy Bible) before all the books that ever I have seen, as most fit for a wounded conscience'.²¹

Bunyan's study of Martin Luther took place at the same time as he was attending the Bedford Independent Church then under the pastorate of John Gifford to whose preaching and counsel he pays the highest tribute. Bunyan's spiritual progress was not easy and he records many temptations and assaults from the Evil One as he was brought to an assurance of faith. It was, however, this great doctrine of imputed righteousness that was to bring him liberty. This is how he describes it,

One day as I was passing into the field, and that too with some dashes on my conscience, fearing lest yet all was not right, suddenly this sentence fell upon my soul, 'Thy righteousness is in heaven.' And methought withal, I saw with the eyes of my soul, Jesus Christ at God's right hand; there, I say was my righteousness; so that wherever I was or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, 'He wants my righteousness', for that was just before him. I saw moreover

that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor from my bad frame that made my righteousness worse; for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself, ‘the same yesterday, today and forever’.

Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed; I was loosened from my afflictions and iron; my temptations also fled away; so that from that time those dreadful Scriptures of God left off to trouble me: now went I also home rejoicing, for the grace and love of God, so that when I came home I looked to see if I could find that sentence: ‘Thy righteousness is in heaven’, but could not find such a saying; wherefore my heart began to sink again, only that was brought to my remembrance, 1 Cor. 1:30, ‘He is made unto us of God, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption’; by this word I saw the other sentence true.

For by this Scripture I saw the man Christ Jesus, as he is distinct from us, as touching his bodily presence, so he is our righteousness and sanctification before God. Here, therefore, I lived for some time very sweetly at peace with God through Christ; Oh! methought Christ! Christ! there was nothing but Christ that was before my eyes: I was not now (only) for looking upon this and the other benefits of Christ apart, as if his blood, burial or resurrection, but considering him as a whole Christ! as he in whom all these, and all other his virtues, relations, offices and operations met together, and that he sat on the right hand of God in heaven.²²

Bunyan never denied the importance of the believer’s personal righteousness but insisted that the only justifying righteousness was that of Jesus Christ. In these words he graphically described his misunderstanding,

Now I could look from myself to him, and would reckon, that all those graces of God that now were green on me, were yet like those cracked groats and four-pence-half-pennies, that rich men carry in their purses, when their gold is in their trunks at home. Oh! I say my gold was in my trunk at home! In Christ my Lord and Saviour. Now Christ was all; all my righteousness, all my sanctification, and all my redemption.²³

The doctrine of imputed righteousness lay at the heart of the preaching of John Bunyan. It was there explicitly or implicitly whenever he expounded the gospel. It was fundamental to the thinking of a man who took seriously the demands of the Law of God. He knew by painful personal experience that he had no hope of meeting those demands for ‘there is none righteous, no not one’. Only as the Law’s demands were met by Jesus Christ and imputed to him could he stand before God. The sufferings of Christ were endured for his sins and Christ’s active obedience imputed to him ensured that the Law’s demands were met. Only as he grasped these truths for himself could he see that there was ‘Grace abounding to the Chief of Sinners’.

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Endnotes

- 1) John Bunyan, *Works*, ed. G. Offor, Glasgow, 1855, vol. 3, p. 104.
- 2) G.M. Trevelyan, ‘Bunyan’s England’, *The Review of the Churches*, vol. 5, 1928.
- 3) John Bunyan, ‘Grace Abounding’, *Works*, vol. 1, p. 6, para. 6.

- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 7, para. 15.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 43, para. 284.
- 6) J. Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification*, London, 1961, p. 192.
- 7) Quoted, R.L. Greaves, *John Bunyan*, Grand Rapids, 1969, p. 83.
- 8) John Bunyan, *Works*, vol. 2, pp. 313, 314.
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 232.
- 10) J. Brown, *John Bunyan*, London, 1928, p. 218.
- 11) John Bunyan, *Works*, vol. 2, p. 292.
- 12) *Ibid.*
- 13) *Ibid.*, p. 327.
- 14) *Ibid.*
- 15) *Ibid.*, p. 333.
- 16) John Bunyan, 'Grace Abounding', *Works*, vol. 1, p. 11, para. 44.
- 17) J.F. McGregor and B. Reay, *Radical Religion in the English Revolution*, Oxford, 1986, p. 146.
- 18) Quoted, H. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, Oxford, 1963, p. 357.
- 19) J. F. McGregor and B. Reay, *op. cit.*, p. 126.
- 20) John Bunyan, 'Grace Abounding', p. 16, para. 83.
- 21) *Ibid.*, p. 22, paras. 129, 130.
- 22) *Ibid.*, pp. 35.36, paras. 229-31.
- 23) *Ibid.*, p. 36, para. 232.