

Editorial

This year marks the tercentenary of the death of one of the greatest of all English Christians—John Bunyan. By the standards of the world and of this time, Bunyan was a nonentity, who was given to charitable compromise in an age when men would sacrifice their lives for the minutiae of church order. Yet his writings are pure gold, recognized as such by generations of readers, not all of whom can stomach the uncompromisingly Calvinist theology which they contain. Three centuries later, their appeal may be slightly less than it was (there has never been a television series based on any of his works), but his greatness in both English literature and theology is assured.

What can we today learn from the example of a man like Bunyan? First, that it is not necessary to be well-educated or well-connected in order to achieve greatness for the Lord. If God sets his hand on someone, that person will go a long way, and be remembered for it in years to come. How many people could name, say, the Archbishop of Canterbury who sat on his throne at the time of Bunyan's death? In a Church which pursues Ph.D.'s and media attention, we need to be reminded of this simple truth.

Second, Bunyan achieved lasting and all but universal acceptance without compromising his views. They may have been unpopular—he was gaoled for them, after all!—but he never thought it worthwhile to modify them merely to regain his freedom. On the contrary, he used his enforced leisure to record them for posterity in such a way that they would win the admiration, if not the acceptance, of the great majority of those who were opposed to him.

Third, Bunyan lived and died in the presence of God, who was the guide and source of inspiration in his life. This comes out very clearly in his willingness to compromise with other Christians in non-essentials like Baptism, in spite of the pressure put on him by his own colleagues. Bunyan had a clear eye for the essentials, and he promoted them whatever others might think. In a day when 'spiritual gifts', patterns of ministry and other secondary issues threaten to overwhelm us, how we need to retain Bunyan's example at the forefront of our minds.

Lastly, Bunyan was a man who lived in hope. When his pilgrim crossed the river, the trumpets sounded for him on the other side. In the England in which he lived, there was little cause for rejoicing among the servants of the Heavenly King. They had fought for control of the state and lost, and were forced to endure the bitter years of repression and moral licence which followed. It must have been very easy for men of Bunyan's stamp to despair, and to believe that God had abandoned his people. Today, when we live in a

similarly 'godless' age the same sense of despair is equally tempting. But Bunyan did not succumb to it, and neither should we. He knew that there was a God on the throne of Heaven who would one day reverse the fortunes of his Church and People, and restore the honour due to his name.

Bunyan could not have known that within a century of his death there would be a widespread revival in England, in which his own writings would play a not insignificant part. Does any Christian today write with this perspective in view? Or are we all concerned with this year's booklists, this year's media event? Building for the future demands hope that the future will prove us right, and it is this confidence which Bunyan never lacked. We who come after can testify to its soundness; can we also use it as an example for our own thinking in the days ahead?

Nothing would do more honour to the name of Bunyan today than if the Church were to see a renewal of uncompromising theology, firmly rooted in and speaking to the vast unchurched masses. In his day Bunyan spoke to the man in the street, not with childish stories but with deep theology, which he wrapped up in a way which would make it palatable and memorable to the masses. Can we not pray that in our video age there might arise someone with an equally vivid imagination, and an equally firm grounding in good theology, to capture the celluloid world for Christ?

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