

**Laurence S. Kuenning**

**The Bunyan-Burrough debate of 1656-7 analysed using a computer hypertext**

(Westminster Theological Seminary: unpublished PhD thesis, 2000)

Kuenning uses a computer hypertext to compare John Bunyan and Edward Burrough's writings, to see what the terms of the debate were for each side and how far they understood each other. He concludes that while they did not, they were still in profound theological disagreement.

'Bunyan's Luther-inspired gospel of justification by faith apart from works leads him to Calvinistic concepts of predestination and irresistible grace, the former being elaborated in terms of an eternal covenant of redemption between Father and Son ... [T]he terms of this covenant require an Anselmian incarnation of Christ as truly God and truly man in order to accomplish that satisfaction for sin which makes possible the justification of sinners by imputed righteousness.' Bunyan insists on conviction of unbelief understood as something *in addition to* moral transgressions (which can come from law or conscience), and faith in Christ's external work alone. Burrough has a very different soteriology (doctrine or theory of salvation): namely, conviction of sin by the inner light, which also shows the Saviour. He sees Bunyan's religion as all 'external', all about words and doctrines, not inner change.

Kuenning compares how they misunderstand each other, and clarifies what is essentially at stake: these different soteriologies, rather than the doctrine of Christ's person, concerning which they largely agree but misunderstand each other (though Burrough holds the distinctively Quaker view that Christ is physically present in his saints, in his risen and glorified flesh). Bunyan denies that Burrough's soteriology, insofar as he understands it, allows for an orthodox Christology; and Burrough thinks Bunyan is wilfully slandering the Quakers, as a result of the impression created by Bunyan's very different use of the same terminology.

**Keywords:** Bunyan-Burrough debate, Quakers and Puritans/Separatists, Quaker and Puritan theology compared, notably soteriology; conviction of sin, justification, sanctification, atonement, inward light, regeneration. Doctrine of the celestial body/flesh (of Christ). Theological terminology and differences in meaning between denominations and over time. Quaker vocabulary.

**Who it would be useful for:** Historians of theology and those interested in Bunyan and Quakerism.

A copy of the full thesis can be downloaded at

<http://www.qhpress.org/texts/bvb/lkbbda.html>

and related primary texts can be found at

<http://www.qhpress.org/texts/bvb/index.html>

## **Chapter 1: Reader, compare them both together**

### **Chapter 2: To be judged by honest men**

Chapter 1 gives some historical background to the debate, and explains Kuenning's use of a computer hypertext to compare the writings of the two antagonists, identifying terminology which is discussed at length in chapter 3. Chapter 2 reviews the scholarly literature on the debate.

### **Chapter 3: Indeed, Thy Words Are Dark:**

Quakers developed a specialised theological vocabulary to distinguish their concepts, and to protect them from what they perceived to be an attempt by the government to impose a certain interpretation of doctrine through the emphasis on university training for ministers, and translation of the scriptures out of the 'original' languages. Quakers denied that these languages were 'original' in respect of the spiritual meaning of the text. Bunyan's community, too, had distinctive linguistic usages, this time more in keeping with Protestant orthodoxy. When Bunyan and Burrough 'looked up one another's terms in their own dictionaries', this led to misunderstandings. Kuenning gives some examples of contrasting meanings:

The word 'human' in Fox means 'out of the earth' (from 'humus'), while Christ was 'the man from heaven'. The 'gospel' means the light or seed for Quakers, who refuse to acknowledge Bunyan's meaning, which was primarily the good news of the atoning death of Christ and justification by faith in this. 'Distinct' means disassociated from, in disunity with, or distant from, for Fox and Burrough; therefore they think Bunyan's use of this word implies that Christ is not in his saints. 'Person' always means 'body', for Burrough; he thinks Bunyan means Christ is *physically* present in the Pharisees, as he is in his saints for the Quakers; which scandalises Bunyan! Fox is suspicious of Trinitarian language partly because he mistakes the application of 'person' to God, as meaning body. For 'Burrough 'person' is equivalent to 'confined being' and 'has relation to place, time and change'.' The term 'measure' also causes confusion: 'For Bunyan, true faith is not perfect in its measure, meaning that there is not as much of it as ideally there should be. For Fox, true faith is perfect in its measure, meaning that no matter how little of it there may be, it is a perfect response to the measure of the Spirit that has been given'. Bunyan's use is closer to standard educated

English of the time, but this just shows that ‘both Bunyan and Burrough learned their styles of theological discourse in their respective religious communities’, Bunyan’s being more in keeping with the Protestant orthodoxy of ‘earthly academia of 17<sup>th</sup> century England’ than the ‘heavenly university’ of Fox.

#### **Chapter 4: Much Railing and Secret Shooting**

Burrough attacks the Puritan ministry using Deuteronomy 18, subsuming ‘false prophecy’ under ‘witchcraft’, and holding ‘divination’ to include ‘adding to the scripture the divinations of thy own brain’. ‘Reason itself ... can be subsumed under the concept of divination when it is used to arrive at pretended divine knowledge without waiting for genuine divine inspiration.’ Bunyan records that he was accused of ‘conjunction and witchcraft’ by Quaker opponents: ‘In Bunyan’s mind, to preach according to the scriptures is to cite scripture texts and expound them correctly. But Bunyan’s Quaker antagonist no doubt saw him as expounding scriptures incorrectly, applying lengthy but perverted reasoning processes to the text ... instead of depending on the inspiration of the same Spirit that gave forth the text.’ Bunyan’s Puritan preaching style – ‘what [he] felt’ but with ‘reasons, points and uses’ made him appear to the Quakers as ‘one who preached the saints’ experiences of former times without himself living in the same Spirit’.

Kuening argues that Bunyan works a detailed discussion arguing against the Quaker interpretation of John 1.9 into a structure that doesn’t easily fit it, leading Burrough to accuse him of ‘secret smiting’ and ‘Shoot[ing] in the Twilight’. For Bunyan, the light in John 1.9 is a created light.

Burrough attacks Bunyan in a style common to Quakers at the time, which their contemporaries thought of as ‘railing’ but they insisted was prophetic denunciation of a ‘Generation of Vipers, Serpents and Hipocrites’ inspired by the Spirit: the Biblical tone reflects a belief that, as Kuennings puts it, ‘God has his own linguistic style’. ‘Feeling himself divinely led to write, Burrough produces a text studded with features reminiscent of the English Bible.’ His prophetic style sometimes leads him to show ‘more interest in rebuking Bunyan for his sins than in clarifying theological concepts’ or engaging in systematic argument. Bunyan tends to take as his exemplar the ‘diligent study and spiritual understanding’ of St Luke, rather than the prophets, which realises itself as ‘doctrines,

reasons, points and uses' in the 'standard manner of a Puritan sermon or lecture'. Both literary styles break down to an extent, as the debate 'takes on a life of its own'.

### **Chapter 5: Corrupting My Words And Calling Me Liar**

As a consequence of the point-by-point method of refutation, 'all the pamphlets become heavily front-loaded with wrangling over vague smears.' Burrough holds Bunyan's queries about his orthodoxy to spring from an unspiritual, over-intellectualised lack of acquaintance with the Spirit, and so refuses to give straight answers. Both sides use a kind of satirical humour, and Kuenning observes a notable case in which Burrough successfully attacks Bunyan's reasoning on a certain point only to commit the same fallacy himself elsewhere.

### **Chapter 6: Gloriously Without The Gates**

'Bunyan's overriding concern in the debate is that the Quakers' apparently exclusive preaching of something they call 'Christ within' is causing people to neglect the real basis of salvation, which is to believe in what Christ has accomplished without them by his righteousness, death resurrection and ascension.' In order to engage the reader in contemplation of the events of Christ's life, Bunyan arranges *Some Gospel Truths Opened* chronologically in accordance with the events. But this doesn't show the logical connections between the events and the doctrines related to them, which only come out through particular disagreements in the point-by-point debate. This masks Bunyan's central concern from Burrough. 'To Burrough's profession of faith that salvation is by Jesus Christ, Bunyan retorts that this faith, to be valid, must specify that Christ fully accomplished salvation on the cross of Calvary', by satisfying for sin and fulfilling the law sufficiently for the justification of those to whom his righteousness is imputed. The Spirit of Christ within the believer sanctifies, but it does not justify; that was done by the death and resurrection alone (that is, although faith as a work of the Spirit in man lays hold on justification, God does not regard human faith as if it were meritorious, but only the death of Christ, in deciding to justify the ungodly). So regardless of the fact that Burrough believes salvation to be of Christ alone, as far as Bunyan is concerned, he doesn't believe in that salvation in the right way; he doesn't put it down purely to what Christ did externally and historically. 'If salvation could have been

accomplished any other way, then there was no reason for Christ to become man and die on the cross'. Predestination and limited atonement are 'necessary presuppositions' in such a scheme. Faith rejoices in the divine gift of salvation, but plays no role in attaining it, the elect merely lay hold on their salvation through their faith. Burrough does not understand Bunyan's theology, so all he sees is slanderous attacks on Quakerism, backed up with scriptural quotations whose interpretation he thinks he often shares with Bunyan (hence the slander).

### **Chapter 7: Some Four or Five Foot Long**

For Bunyan, being present in heaven and 'being present anywhere else are mutually exclusive. For Burrough, on the other hand, since the ascension leads above all heavens it is the path not to earthly absence but to omnipresence. Christ is thus within the disciples and without them at the same time.' Burrough speaks of Christ being 'ascended far above all Heavens' and says he 'fills all things' (Eph.4.10); Bunyan treats his ascension into heaven quite literally: the material heaven, where the sun, moon and stars are placed ... above which Jesus the Son of Mary is ascended.' That is, Christ is now 'absent from his people touching his bodily presence, though present in spirit.' But for Burrough and Fox, Christ's presence in his saints includes his flesh as well. Fox pairs flesh with spirit when he speaks of Christ as 'he who did ascend to be made manifest in his saints, in flesh, in spirit, that did descend.' Thus, 'For Bunyan the required belief focuses on Christ's death at Jerusalem because only it can atone for one's sins; for Burrough, what must be truly confessed, and therefore truly witnessed [in one's life and experience, not just by verbal assent], is the same flesh that died at Jerusalem *manifest in one's own body*.' For Burrough, one cannot understand the outward Christ aright, unless he has been manifested within (the manifestation in oneself, of his risen, spiritualised, vivifying *flesh*, that is). In common with other early Quakers Burrough apparently believes that Christ had flesh before his earthly manifestation, flesh like the resurrection body described by St Paul in 1 Cor.15. He is therefore uncomfortable with Bunyan's expression 'flesh that he took from the Virgin Mary'. Writers like Barclay and Penington made a distinction between the life giving spiritual body of Christ, and his outward, earthly form; for Burrough this implies 'two bodies' contrary to Eph.4.4. Barclay and Penington, according to Kuenning, were attempting to rationalise an earlier doctrine of

the heavenly flesh of Christ which was emotionally compelling, in that it involved an 'almost physical identification with Christ', but not very intellectually respectable.

Bunyan cannot understand what difference the incarnation makes, from a Quaker point of view, because they do not share his Anselmian (satisfactionary) assumptions about the atonement. Burrough, on the other hand, thinks of the manhood of the Son of God as a 'raw datum of religious experience': the 'only Christ Burrough knows is one who has come in the flesh', first in his own flesh, then in that of his saints. He thinks that Bunyan is slandering the Quakers, and that his questions are designed to entrap: he would never ask them, if he knew Christ within himself. 'Bunyan wants Burrough to demonstrate the importance of Christ's manhood [by answering the question *Cur Deus Homo?*], but Burrough cannot consider that Christ might have been any other than he is. Burrough ... wants Bunyan to exhibit Christ's manhood in his own life by repenting of slandering the innocent, but Bunyan cannot see that his charges amount to slander. Each is therefore certain that his own church, and not the other's, is founded on Jesus Christ as God and man.'

### **Chapter 8: Close On a Sudden With Something Within**

The debate focuses on the Quaker doctrine of the light more than any other single issue. 'For Bunyan, the chief practical error of Quakerism is its confusion of two apparently similar but really distinct experiences, both of which may be called 'conviction of sin' [given by the light, for Quakers] but only one of which [for Bunyan] is properly part of the salvation process.' Bunyan identifies stages in becoming aware of one's own sinfulness; he is apparently afraid that Quakers are getting stuck at the penultimate stage, of relying on their own works: 'their awareness of their own sinfulness is not yet adequate to drive them on to rely on Christ and Christ alone for justification. Any faith they may have acquired so far is therefore merely theoretical, not properly connected to their own real condition.' The difference consists in whether the conviction is by natural or supernatural agency, and whether one is convicted only of sins against the moral law, or also of unbelief.

Instead of the usual Calvinist approach of 'urging people to look for the fruits of faith in their lives', Bunyan looks to the causes of faith: 'only the right kind of conviction can lead to the right kind of faith.' The Spirit is truly at work where one is convicted of unbelief as well as moral transgressions, and where conviction of Christ's imputed righteousness follows

upon conviction of sin. Suitable questions for self-examination, then, include ‘When did God show thee thou wert no Christian?’

‘It is from within this framework that Bunyan views the Quaker preaching of a light that enlightens everyone, which will convince of sin and lead to salvation.’ ‘Light’ is not a particularly important term for him, so he searches for something from within his own understanding to which they might be referring. There is some ambiguity about whether he thinks this is the created, natural light of conscience (which is what Bunyan thinks John 1.9 refers to, and which he also thinks convicts of moral sins but not of unbelief); or a diabolical counterfeit of the Spirit deceiving them. It cannot be the Spirit, for it does not bring them to a conviction of unbelief, which they are in fact guilty of, since they do not throw themselves on Christ’s historical work alone for justification. Bunyan doesn’t recognise that Burrough believes Christ’s manhood was pre-existent, but probably wouldn’t be much affected if he did, since Christ’s external saving work is what matters for Bunyan in regard to justification, not anything else he does as God or man.

Burrough confuses Bunyan’s account of the natural light of conscience with his implications of diabolical deception, leading him to accuse Bunyan of blasphemous self-contradiction. But the main source of their difference is that Burrough applies to Christ as mediator verses of John 1 which Bunyan considers to refer to Christ as creator; and unlike Bunyan, Burrough does not believe in two sources of conviction of sin which differ in their content: ‘For Burrough, the light spoken of in John 1.9 is a primary theological datum ... this ‘first principle’ is the light itself, not a doctrine about it. When he tells Bunyan to ‘learn’ this first principle, he is proposing in the first place a moral and spiritual exercise, not a theological or exegetical one: Bunyan must submit to conviction of sin’, that is, by the light, in Burrough’s sense, and acknowledge the possibility of renewal found in the light. There is no distinction between unbelief and other sins, and justification and sanctification are of a piece; the light’s revelatory function is ‘an important part of bridging the gap between God and fallen man.’ It is no part of Burrough’s conception of his ministry to help people to discern the ‘right kind’ of conviction: ‘Burrough sees his task as a preacher to be that of bringing people face to face with the light that will convince them of sin; if he is successful in this he will not need to urge his hearers to seek conviction or to explain to them how they can recognise it, for they will have arrived at it, and the light that shows them their sins will be sufficient to show them their Saviour.’

## **Chapter 9: While We are Both Silent: Conclusions.**

Bunyan and Burrough were 'both recent converts to intense minority religious communities. Each passed through a powerful experience of conviction of sin to arrive at a new identity that would mould the rest of his life as a leading figure in a persecuted church.' Both learned their faith in the context of their community: Bunyan 'had as mentors and role models men who were in substantial continuity with the Puritan tradition of Calvinistic Protestantism', and his faith and theological and ministerial method was in keeping. For Burrough, the content of the true faith 'was not to be learned from the academics but to be rediscovered by divine guidance as the true church was raised up again and restored to its primitive glory.' As a consequence of all this, 'miscommunication was rampant as each side used words according to its own technical jargon and quoted scriptures with its own understanding of what they meant. Little real effort at mutual understanding was evident as each side already knew where the truth lay.' 'Both believed Christ was both within and without, though Bunyan thought Burrough denied him without and Burrough thought Bunyan fought against him within. Both believed salvation was a supernatural work, both believed it commenced with an intense conviction of sin, and both believed that the saved would go on to lead righteous lives distinct from the world. But their visions of *how* Christ saves were dramatically different. Had they understood each other better than they did, they might still have anathematised each other with all the conviction they showed in their lack of understanding.'

**Summary prepared by Andrew Harvey (2012)**