

## II. “*A Holy Life*”: Bunyan’s Theology of Piety<sup>1</sup>

[This is an excerpt from Chapter 3 of Brian G. Najapfour, “‘The Very Heart of Prayer’: Reclaiming John Bunyan’s Spirituality.” Th.M. thesis, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, 2009.]

The Puritans are well-known for their strong emphasis on purity both in doctrine and in practice. In fact, this very emphasis is obviously one reason why they have been labeled *puritans*. In chapter one, a case was made that on the ground of this same emphasis, Bunyan can be deservedly regarded as a Puritan. Bunyan undeniably held the essence of Puritanism which may be described in two words: *God* (doctrine) and *godliness* (practice). The Puritans believe that right doctrine of God prompts holy practice, and that the practice of holiness becomes only superficial when it does not emanate from the proper knowledge of God.

Charles Hambrick-Stowe contends that “‘at its heart... Puritanism was a devotional movement, rooted in religious experience, and that ‘the rise of Puritanism and the settlement of New England ought to be understood as a significant episode in the ongoing history of Christian spirituality.’”<sup>2</sup> This reinforces the importance of reading Bunyan in light of his spirituality.

Bunyan’s pursuit in all of life—especially in preaching and in writing—was personal piety. With the help of the Holy Spirit, he made every effort to “be a pattern, and example of piety.” From Bunyan’s own testimony:

Singularity in godliness, if it be in godliness, no man should be ashamed of. For that is no more than to be more godly, than to walk more humbly with God than others: and for my part, I had rather be a pattern, and example of piety: I had rather that my life should be instructing to the Saints, and condemning to the world, with *Noah* and *Lot*; than to hazard my self among the multitude of the dross[y].<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The quote is the title of Bunyan’s treatise. See John Bunyan, “A Holy Life,” in *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 9, gen. ed. Roger Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 346.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Dewey D. Wallace, Introduction to *The Spirituality of the Later English Puritans: An Anthology* (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987), xi.

<sup>3</sup> John Bunyan, “A Holy Life,” 346.

When by faith Bunyan came to know the redeeming Jesus, his life began to manifest genuine godliness. In his *Israel's Hope Encouraged*, written about 1680-81, but only published in 1692, Bunyan attests this truth: "The Knowledge & Faith of this Redemption prepareth Man to an holy life."<sup>4</sup> In other words, it is only when one truly understands by faith Christ's redemptive work that he can sincerely start to live a pious life. Bunyan confesses in his spiritual autobiography that before he came to the saving knowledge of Christ, he had experienced "some outward Reformation," but since this outward change was not rooted in the gospel it did not last:

[O]ur Neighbours did take me to be a very godly man, a new and religious man, and did marvel much to see such a great and famous alteration in my life and manners; and indeed so it was, though yet I knew not Christ, nor Grace, nor Faith, nor Hope; and truly as I have well seen since, had I then died, my state had been most fearful: well, this I say, continued about a twelve-month, or more.<sup>5</sup>

At this time, Bunyan, in his own words, "was nothing but a poor painted Hypocrite, yet," he admits, "I loved to be talked of as one that was truly Godly. I was proud of my Godliness; and, I did all I did, either to be seen of, or to be well spoken of, by men."<sup>6</sup> But in "the good providence of God" as Bunyan calls it, he began to desire "the true tokens of a truly godly man."<sup>7</sup> Later, he elucidates what he means by a truly holy life:

By an holy life I mean, a life according to the moral Law, flowing from a Spirit of thankfulness to God, for giving of his Son to be my Redeemer. This I call an holy life, because it is according to the rule of holiness, the law; and this I call a holy life, because it floweth from such a principle as giveth to God the heart, and life, for the gift bestowed on us.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John Bunyan, "Israel's Hope Encouraged," in *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 9, gen. ed. Roger Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 79.

<sup>5</sup> John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. Roger Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, 14, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Bunyan, "Israel's Hope Encouraged," 79.

One can best discover Bunyan's theology of piety in his treatise *A Holy Life*, printed in 1684. Bunyan penned this discourse during the time when the Nonconformists were being persecuted. Greaves suggests that when Bunyan wrote this piece "John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, for the Marian martyrs, especially John Philpot, were on his mind."<sup>9</sup> But Bunyan would insist that this persecution should not be used as an excuse not to live a holy life.<sup>10</sup> In his commentary on Genesis, he remarks: "we must count these Afflictions not as coming from the Hand of God in a way of Vengeance, for want of Satisfaction for the Breach of the Law; but to shew and keep us in mind of his Holiness, that henceforth we should not, as at first through Ignorance, so now from Notions of Grace and Mercy presume to continue in Sin."<sup>11</sup> Bunyan continues to insist on piety whatever the situation.

The treatise, *A Holy Life*, as its subtitle indicates, is an exhortation to Christians to be holy. It is an exposition of the latter part of 2 Timothy 2:19: *Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity*; and its main theme "rests on the simple premiss that 'a godly life annexed to faith in Christ, is so necessary that a man that professes the name of Christ, is worse than a beast without it.'"<sup>12</sup> In the remaining part of this chapter, I will consider the following: foundation of piety, God-appointed means by which believers exercise piety, reasons for and meaning of living a life of holiness, and four essential ingredients to living a holy life.

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<sup>9</sup> Bunyan, "A Holy Life," xxiii.

<sup>10</sup> Bunyan, "A Holy Life," xxiv.

<sup>11</sup> John Bunyan, "An Exposition on the Ten First Chapters of Genesis," in *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 12, gen. ed. Roger Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 147

<sup>12</sup> Introduction to Bunyan, "A Holy Life," xli, 350.